

By the same author



THE DEATH OF THE HEART
THE LAST SEPTEMBER
THE HOUSE IN PARIS
THE HOTEL
THE CAT JUMPS
TO THE NORTH
LOOK AT ALL THOSE ROSES
FRIENDS AND RELATIONS
JOINING CHARLES
THE HEAT OF THE DAY



*Published, or to be published
Uniform with this
Volume*



WRAPPED THE BATH TOWEL ROUND HER

ELIZABETH BOWEN



THE DEMON LOVER

and other stories



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED 1945
FIRST PUBLISHED IN THE COLLECTED EDITION 1952



PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CITY OF OXFORD
AT THE ALDEN PRESS
BOUND BY A W BAIN & CO LTD , LONDON

C O N T E N T S

IN THE SQUARE	9
SUNDAY AFTERNOON	20
THE INHERITED CLOCK	31
THE CHEERY SOUL	59
SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME	73
THE DEMON LOVER	91
CARELESS TALK	100
THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS	107
IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS	130
PINK MAY	171
GREEN HOLLY	182
MYSTERIOUS KÔR	196
POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR	216

N O T E

OF the following stories, 'In the Square' has appeared in *Horizon*, 'Sunday Afternoon' in *Life and Letters*, 'The Cheery Soul', 'The Demon Lover' and 'Green Holly' in *The Listener*, 'The Inherited Clock' and 'Happy Autumn Fields' in *The Cornhill*, 'Songs My Father Sang Me' and 'Pink May' in *English Story*, 'Careless Talk' in *The New Yorker*, and 'Mysterious Kôr' in *Penguin New Writing*

IN THE SQUARE

AT about nine o'clock on this hot bright July evening the square looked mysterious it was completely empty, and a whitish reflection, ghost of the glare of midday, came from the pale-coloured façades on its four sides and seemed to brim it up to the top The grass was parched in the middle, its shaved surface was paid for by people who had gone The sun, now too low to enter normally, was able to enter brilliantly at a point where three of the houses had been bombed away, two or three of the may trees, dark with summer, caught on their tops the illicit gold Each side of the breach, exposed wallpapers were exaggerated into viridians, yellows and corals that they had probably never been Elsewhere, the painted front doors under the balconies and at the tops of steps not whitened for some time stood out in the deadness of colour with light off it Most of the glassless windows were shuttered or boarded up, but some framed hollow inside dark

The extinct scene had the appearance of belonging to some ages ago Time having only been thrust forward for reasons that could no longer affect the square, this still was a virtual eight o'clock One taxi did now enter at the north side and cruise round the polish to a house in a corner a man got out and paid his fare He glanced round him, satisfied to find the shell of the place here In spite of the dazzling breach, the square's acoustics had altered very little in the confined sound of his taxi

THE DEMON LOVER

driving away there was nothing to tell him he had not arrived to dinner as on many summer evenings before He went up familiar steps and touched the chromfum bell Some windows of this house were not shuttered, though they were semi-blinded by oiled stuff behind which the curtains dimly hung these windows fixed on the outdoors their tenacious look, some of the sashes were pushed right up, to draw this singular summer evening – parched, freshening and a little acrid with rains – into the rooms in which people lived When the bell was not answered, the man on the steps frowned at the jade green front door, then rang again On which the door was opened by an unfamiliar person, not a maid, who stood pushing up her top curls She wore a cotton dress and studied him with the coldly intimate look he had found new in women since his return

By contrast with the fixed outdoor silence, this dark interior was a cave of sound The house now was like a machine with the silencer off it, there was nothing muted, the carpets looked thin One got a feeling of functional anarchy, of loose plumbing, of fittings shocked from their place From the basement came up a smell of basement cooking, a confident voice and the sound of a shutting door At the top of the house a bath was being run out A tray of glasses was moved, so inexpertly that everything on it tinkled, somewhere in the drawing-room over his head

‘She’s expecting you, is she?’ said the sceptical girl He saw on the table behind her only a couple of leaflets and a driver’s cap

‘I think so’

‘You know I’m expecting you!’ exclaimed Magdela, beginning to come round the turn of the stairs

IN THE SQUARE

'Sorry,' said the girl, stepping back to speak up the staircase 'I didn't know you were in' Turning, she disappeared through a waiting door, the door behind the dining-room, which she shut 'Do come up, Rupert,' said Magdela, extending her hand to him from where she stood 'I'm sorry, I meant to come down myself'

Of the three drawing-room windows two stood open, so she must have heard the taxi her failure to get to the door in time had been due to some inhibition or last thought It would have been remarkable if she *had* yet arrived at the manner in which to open her own door – which would have to be something quite different from the impulsive informality of peacetime The tray of glasses she had been heard moving now stood on a pedestal table beside a sofa She said 'These days, there is no one to ' Indeed the expanse of parquet, though unmarked, no longer showed watery gloss and depth. Though it may have only been by the dusk that the many white lampshades were discoloured, he saw under one, as he sat down beside her, a film of dust over the bulb Though they were still many, the lamps were fewer, some had been put away with the bric-à-brac that used to be on the tables and in the alcoves – and these occasional blanks were the least discomforting thing in the dead room The reflections in from the square fell on the chairs and sofas already worn rough on their satin tops and arms, and with grime homing into their rubbed parts

This had been the room of a hostess, the replica of so many others that you could not count It had never had any other aspect, and it had no aspect at all tonight The chairs remained so many, and their pattern was now so completely without focus that, had Magdela not sat down

THE DEMON LOVER

where she did sit, he would not have known in which direction to turn

'How nice it was of you to ring me up,' she said 'I had no idea you were back in London. How did you know I was here? No one else is'

'I happened to hear '

'Oh, did you?' she said, a little bit disconcerted, then added quickly 'Were you surprised?'

'I was delighted, naturally'

'I came back,' she said 'For the first year I was away, part of the time in the country, part of the time in the north with Anthony - he has been there since this all started, you know. Then, last winter, I decided to come back'

'You are a Londoner'

She said mechanically 'Yes, I suppose so - yes. It's so curious to see you again, like this. Who would think that this was the same world?' She looked sideways out of the window, at the square 'Who would have thought this could really happen? The last time we - how long ago was that? Two years ago?'

'A delightful evening'

'Was it?' she said, and looked round the room. 'How nice. One has changed so much since then, don't you think? It is quite'

At this point the door opened and a boy of about sixteen came in, in a dressing-gown. Not only was his hair twisted in tufts of dampness but a sort of humidity seemed to follow him, as though he were trailing the bathroom steam. 'Oh, sorry,' he said, but after a glance at Rupert he continued his way to the cigarette box. 'Bennet,' said Magdela, 'I feel sure you ought not to smoke - Rupert, this is my nephew, Bennet, I expect we

IN THE SQUARE

sometimes talked about him. He is here just for the night, on his way from school.'

'That reminds me,' said Bennet, 'would you very much mind if I stayed tomorrow?' Rupert watched Bennet squinting as he lighted a cigarette. 'They say everyone's smoking more, now,' said Bennet. 'Actually, I hardly smoke at all.' He dropped the match into the empty steel grate. 'I took a bath,' he said to Magdela. 'I'm just going out.'

'Oh, Bennet, have you had anything to eat?'

'Well, I had tea at six,' he said, 'with an egg. I expect I'll pick up something at a Corner House.' He stooped to pull up a slipper on one heel and said 'I didn't know you had visitors. As a matter of fact, I didn't know you were in. But everyone seems to be in tonight.' When he went out he did not shut the door behind him, and they could hear him slip-slopping upstairs. 'He's very independent,' said Magdela. 'But these days I suppose everyone is?'

'I must say,' he said, 'I'm glad you are not alone here. I should not like to think of your being that.'

'Wouldn't you?' she said. 'Well; I never am. This is my only room in the house - and, even so, as you see, Bennet comes in. The house seems to belong to everyone now. That was Gina who opened the front door.'

'Yes,' he said, 'who is she?'

'She used to be Anthony's secretary, but she wanted to come to London to drive a car for the war, so he told her she could live in this house, because it was shut up at that time. So it seemed to be quite hers, when I came back. She is supposed to sit in the back dining-room, that was why I couldn't ask you to dinner. But also, there is nobody who can cook - there is a couple down ~~up~~ the basement, but they are independent, they are only

THE DEMON LOVER

supposed to be caretakers They have a son who is a policeman, and I know he sometimes sleeps somewhere at the top of the house – but caretakers are so hard to get They have a schoolgirl daughter who comes in here when she thinks I am not about ’

‘It seems to me you have a lot to put up with Wouldn’t you be more comfortable somewhere else?’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘is that how you think of me?’

‘I do hope you will dine with me, one night soon’

‘Thank you,’ she said, evasively ‘Some night that would be very nice ’

‘I suppose the fact is, you are very busy?’

‘Yes, I am I am working, doing things quite a lot ’ She told him what she did, then her voice trailed off He realized that he and she could not be intimate without many other people in the room He looked at the empty pattern of chairs round them and said ‘Where are all those people I used to meet?’ ‘Whom do you mean, exactly?’ she said, startled ‘ Oh, in different places, different places, you know I think I have their addresses, if there’s anyone special ’

‘You hear news of them?’

‘Oh yes, oh yes, I’m sure I do’ What can I tell you that would be interesting? I’m sorry,’ she said suddenly, shutting her eyes, ‘but so much has happened ’ Opening her eyes to look at him, she added ‘So much more than you know ’

To give point to this, the telephone started ringing the bell filled the room, the sounding-box of the house, and travelled through windows into the square Rupert remembered how, on other summer evenings, you had constantly heard the telephones in the houses round It was tonight startling to hear a telephone ring Magdela

IN THE SQUARE

stared at the telephone, at a distance from her – not as though she shared this feeling that Rupert had, but as though something happened out of its time. She seemed to forbid the bell with her eyes, with that intent fixed warning intimate look, and, seeming unwilling to leave the sofa, contracted into stone-stillness by Rupert's side. At a loss, he said ‘Like me to see who it is?’

‘No, I will, I must,’ her voice hardened ‘Or they will be answering from downstairs’

This evidently did happen, the bell stopped an instant before her fingers touched the receiver. She raised it, listened into it, frowned ‘It's all right, Gina,’ she said ‘Thank you you needn't bother I'm here’

She stood with her back to Rupert, with her head bent, still warily listening to the receiver. Then ‘Yes, it's me now,’ she said, in an all at once very much altered tone ‘but ’

After Gina had let in Rupert she went back to continue to wait for her telephone call. She always answered from the foot of the stairs. Before sitting down again, or not sitting down, she went through from the back to the front dining-room, to open the window overlooking the square. The long table and the two sideboards were, as she always remembered them, sheeted up, and a smell of dust came from the sheets. Returning to the room that was hers to sit in, she left the archway doors open behind her, so that, before the black-out, air might pass through. The perspective of useless dining-room through the archway, the light fading from it through the bombed gap, did not affect her. She had not enough imagination to be surprised by the past – still less, by its end. When, the November after the war started, she first came to sleep

THE DEMON LOVER

in the closed house, she had, as Anthony's mistress, speculated as to this former part of his life She supposed he had gained something by entertaining, though it did not seem to her he had much to show While she stayed faithful to him she pitied him for a number of reasons she did not let appear Now that she had begun to deceive him she found only that one reason to pity him Now she loved someone else in a big way, she supposed it was time to clear out of this house She only thought this, she did not feel it, her feelings were not at all fine She did not know how to move without bringing the whole thing up, which would be tough on Anthony while he was in the north

As to her plans for tonight - she never knew So much depended - or, she might hear nothing She wondered if she should put in time by writing to Anthony, she got out her pad and sat with it on her knee Hearing Bennet's bath continue to run out she thought, that's a funny time for a bath Underneath where she sat, the caretaker's wife was washing up the supper dishes and calling over her shoulder to her policeman son the voice came out through the basement window and withered back on the silence round

She wrote words on the pad

'Since I came here one thing and another seems to have altered my point of view I don't know how to express myself, but I think under the circumstances I ought to tell you Being here has started to get me down, for one thing it is such a way from the bus Of course it has been a help, but don't you think it would be better if your wife had the place all to herself? As far as I can see she means to stay Naturally she and I do not refer to this But,

IN THE SQUARE

for instance, if she had two nephews there would be no place for the other to sleep

And looked at them with her head on one side. She heard Bennet come down the flights of staircase, rigidly dropping his feet from step to step. He pulled up with a jingle of the things in his pockets and thought of something outside her door. O God, don't let him come bothering in here, you see I might get this done. But he did leaning his weight on the door handle, and with the other hand holding the frame of the door, he swung forward at her, with damp-flattened hair.

'Sorry,' he said, 'but shall you be going out?' She kept a hold on her letter-pad and said fiercely 'Why?'

'If not, I might have your key.'

'Why not ask your aunt?'

'She's got someone there. You mean, you might go out, but you don't know?'

'No. Don't come bothering here, like a good boy. What's the matter with you, have you got a date?'

'No,' he said. 'I just want some food in some place.'

He walked away from her through the archway and looked out at the square from the end of the dining-room. The lampless dusk seemed to fascinate him. 'There are quite a lot of people standing about,' he said. 'Couples. This must be quite a place. Do you suppose they go into the empty houses?'

'No, they're all locked up.'

'What's the good of that, I don't see?'

'They're property.'

'I should say they were cracked, I shouldn't say they'd ever be much use. Oh, sorry, are you writing a letter? I say, I thought they were taking the railings away from squares, I thought the iron was some good. You think

THE DEMON LOVER

this place will patch up? I suppose it depends who wants it Anybody can have it as far as I'm concerned You can't get to anywhere from here'

'Hadn't you better push off? Everywhere will be shut '
'I know, but what about the key?'

But her head turned sharply the telephone started ringing at the foot of the stairs Bennet's expression became more hopeful 'Go on, why don't you,' he said, 'then we might know where we are'

Gina came back to him from the telephone, with one hand pushing her curls up 'So what' said Bennet

'That was for her,' she said 'It would be I got my head bitten off No place for me on that line You'd think she was the only one in the house' She picked up her bag and gave him the key out of it 'Oh, all right,' she said 'Here you are Run along'

He thumbed the key and said 'Oh, then it wasn't your regular?'

'Nothing of mine,' she said 'Regular if you like Look, I thought you were going to run along'

Just before Bennet shut the front door behind him he heard a ghostly click from the telephone at the foot of the stairs - in the drawing-room the receiver had been put back Whatever there had been to say to his aunt must have been said - or totally given up He thought, so what was the good of *that*? Stepping down into the dusk of the square, that lay at the foot of the steps like water, he heard voices above his head His aunt and her visitor stood at one of the open windows, looking down, or seeming to look down, at the lovers Rupert and Magdela for the moment looked quite intimate, as though they had withdrawn to the window from a

IN THE SQUARE

number of people in the room behind them – only in that case the room would have been lit up

Bennet, going out to hunt food, kept close along under the fronts of the houses with a primitive secretiveness He made for the north outlet of the square, by which Rupert's taxi had come in, and at last in the distance heard the sound of a bus

Magdela smiled and said to Rupert 'Yes, look Now the place seems to belong to everyone One has nothing except one's feelings Sometimes I think I hardly know myself'

'How curious that light is,' he said, looking across at the gap

'You know, I am happy' This was her only reference to the words he had heard her say to the telephone 'Of course, I have no plans This is no time to make plans, now But do talk to me – perhaps you have no plans, either? I have been so selfish, talking about myself But to meet you after so much has happened – in one way, there seemed nothing to talk about Do tell me how things strike you, what you have thought of things – coming back to everything like you have Do you think we shall all see a great change?'

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

‘So here you are!’ exclaimed Mrs Vesey to the newcomer who joined the group on the lawn. She reposited for an instant her light, dry fingers on his ‘Henry has come from London,’ she added. Acquiescent smiles from the others round her showed that the fact was already known – she was no more than indicating to Henry the role that he was to play. ‘What are your experiences? – Please tell us. But nothing dreadful we are already feeling a little sad.’

‘I am sorry to hear that,’ said Henry Russel, with the air of one not anxious to speak of his own affairs. Drawing a cane chair into the circle, he looked from face to face with concern. His look travelled on to the screen of lilac, whose dark purple, pink-silver, and white plumes sprayed out in the brilliance of the afternoon. The late May Sunday blazed, but was not warm something less than a wind, a breath of coldness, fretted the edge of things. Where the lilac barrier ended, across the sun-polished meadows, the Dublin mountains continued to trace their hazy, today almost colourless line. The coldness had been admitted by none of the seven or eight people who, in degrees of elderly beauty, sat here full in the sun, at this sheltered edge of the lawn. They continued to master the coldness, or to deny it, as though with each it were some secret *malaise*. An air of fastidious, stylized melancholy, an air of being secluded

S U N D A Y A F T E R N O O N

behind glass, characterized for Henry these old friends in whose shadow he had grown up To their pleasure at having him back among them was added, he felt, a taboo or warning – he was to tell a little, but not much He could feel with a shock, as he sat down, how insensibly he had deserted, these last years, the aesthetic of living that he had got from them As things were, he felt over him their suspended charm The democratic smell of the Dublin bus, on which he had made the outward journey to join them, had evaporated from his person by the time he was half-way up Mrs Vesey's chestnut avenue Her house, with its fanlights and tall windows, was a villa in the Italian sense, just near enough to the city to make the country's sweetness particularly acute Now, the sensations of wartime, that locked his inside being, began as surely to be dispelled – in the influence of this eternalized Sunday afternoon

'Sad?' he said, 'that is quite wrong'

'These days, our lives seem unreal,' said Mrs Vesey – with eyes that penetrated his point of view 'But, worse than that, this afternoon we discover that we all have friends who have died'

'Lately?' said Henry, tapping his fingers together

'Yes, in all cases,' said Ronald Cuffe – with just enough dryness to show how much the subject had been beginning to tire him 'Come, Henry, we look to you for distraction To us, these days, you are quite a figure In fact, from all we have heard of London, it is something that you should be alive Are things there as shocking as they say – or are they more shocking?' he went on, with distaste

'Henry's not sure,' said someone, 'he looks pontifical'

Henry, in fact, was just beginning to twiddle this

THE DEMON LOVER

far-off word ‘shocking’ round in his mind, when a diversion caused some turning of heads A young girl stepped out of a window and began to come their way across the lawn She was Maria, Mrs Vesey’s niece. A rug hung over her bare arm she spread out the rug and sat down at her aunt’s feet With folded arms, and her fingers on her thin pointed elbows, she immediately fixed her eyes on Henry Russel ‘Good afternoon,’ she said to him, in a mocking but somehow intimate tone

The girl, like some young difficult pet animal, seemed in a way to belong to everyone there Miss Ria Store, the patroness of the arts, who had restlessly been refolding her fur cape, said ‘And where have *you* been, Maria?’

‘Indoors’

Someone said, ‘On this beautiful afternoon?’

‘Is it?’ said Maria, frowning impatiently at the grass

‘Instinct,’ said the retired judge, ‘now tells Maria it’s time for tea’

‘No, this does,’ said Maria, nonchalantly showing her wrist with the watch on it ‘It keeps good time, thank you, Sir Isaac’ She returned her eyes to Henry ‘What have you been saying?’

‘You interrupted Henry He was just going to speak’

‘Is it so frightening?’ Maria said

‘The bombing?’ said Henry ‘Yes But as it does not connect with the rest of life, it is difficult, you know, to know what one feels One’s feelings seem to have no language for anything so preposterous As for thoughts –’

‘At that rate,’ said Maria, with a touch of contempt, ‘your thoughts would not be interesting’

‘Maria,’ said somebody, ‘that is no way to persuade Henry to talk.’

‘About what is important,’ announced Maria, ‘it seems

S U N D A Y A F T E R N O O N

that no one can tell one anything There is really nothing, till one knows it oneself'

'Henry is probably right,' said Ronald Cuffe, 'in considering that this — this outrage is *not* important There is no place for it in human experience, it apparently cannot make a place of its own It will have no literature'

'Literature!' said Maria 'One can see, Mr Cuffe, that you have always been safe!'

'Maria,' said Mrs Vesey, 'you're rather pert'

Sir Isaac said, 'What does Maria expect to know?'

Maria pulled off a blade of grass and bit it Something calculating and passionate appeared in her, she seemed to be crouched up inside herself She said to Henry sharply 'But you'll go back, of course?'

'To London? Yes — this is only my holiday Anyhow, one cannot stay long away'

Immediately he had spoken Henry realized how subtly this offended his old friends Their position was, he saw, more difficult than his own, and he could not have said a more cruel thing Mrs Vesey, with her adept smile that was never entirely heartless, said 'Then we must hope your time here will be pleasant Is it so very short?'

'And be careful, Henry,' said Ria Store, 'or you will find Maria stowed away in your baggage And there would be an embarrassment, at an English port! We can feel her planning to leave us at any time'

Henry said, rather flatly 'Why should not Maria travel in the ordinary way?'

'Why should Maria travel at all? There is only one journey now — into danger We cannot feel that that is necessary for her.'

Sir Isaac added 'We fear, however, that that is the journey Maria wishes to make'

THE DEMON LOVER

Maria, curled on the lawn with the nonchalance of a feline creature, through this kept her eyes cast down Another cold puff came through the lilac, soundlessly knocking the blooms together One woman, taken quite unawares, shivered – then changed this into a laugh There was an aside about love from Miss Store, who spoke with a cold, abstracted knowledge – ‘Maria has no experience, none whatever, she hopes to meet heroes – she meets none So now she hopes to find heroes across the sea Why, Henry, she might make a hero of you’

‘It is not that,’ said Maria, who had heard Mrs Vesey bent down and touched her shoulder, she sent the girl into the house to see if tea were ready Presently they all rose and followed – in twos and threes, heads either erect composedly or else deliberately bowed in thought Henry knew the idea of summer had been relinquished they would not return to the lawn again In the dining-room – where the white walls and the glass of the pictures held the reflections of summers – burned the log fire they were so glad to see With her shoulder against the mantelpiece stood Maria, watching them take their places at the round table Everything Henry had heard said had fallen off her – in these few minutes all by herself she had started in again on a fresh phase of living that was intact and pure So much so, that Henry felt the ruthlessness of her disregard for the past, even the past of a few minutes ago She came forward and put her hands on two chairs – to show she had been keeping a place for him

Lady Ottery, leaning across the table, said ‘I must ask you → we heard you had lost everything But that cannot be true’

S U N D A Y A F T E R N O O N

Henry said, unwillingly ‘It’s true that I lost my flat, and everything in my flat’

‘*Henry*,’ said Mrs Vesey, ‘all your beautiful things?’

‘Oh dear,’ said Lady Ottery, overpowered, ‘I thought that could not be possible I ought not to have asked’

Ria Store looked at Henry critically ‘You take this too calmly What has happened to you?’

‘It was some time ago And it happens to many people’

‘But not to everyone,’ said Miss Store ‘I should see no reason, for instance, why it should happen to me’

‘One cannot help looking at you,’ said Sir Isaac ‘You must forgive our amazement But there was a time, Henry, when I think we all used to feel that we knew you well If this is not a painful question, at this juncture, why did you not send your valuables out of town? You could have even shipped them over to us’

‘I was attached to them I wanted to live with them,

‘And now,’ said Miss Store, ‘you live with nothing, for ever Can you really feel that that is life?’

‘I do I may be easily pleased It was by chance I was out when the place was hit You may feel – and I honour your point of view – that I should have preferred, at my age, to go into eternity with some pieces of glass and jade and a dozen pictures But, in fact, I am very glad to remain To exist’

‘On what level?’

‘On any level’

‘Come, Henry,’ said Ronald Cuffe, ‘that is a cynicism one cannot like in you You speak of your age to us, of course, that is nothing You are at your maturity’

‘Forty-three’

THE DEMON LOVER

Maria gave Henry an askance look, as though, after all, he were not a friend. But she then said ‘Why should he wish he was dead?’ Her gesture upset some tea on the lace cloth, and she idly rubbed it up with her handkerchief. The tug her rubbing gave to the cloth shook a petal from a Chinese peony in the centre bowl on to a plate of cucumber sandwiches. This little bit of destruction was watched by the older people with fascination, with a kind of appeasement, as though it were a guarantee against something worse.

‘Henry is not young and savage, like you are. Henry’s life is – or was – an affair of attachments,’ said Ria Store. She turned her eyes, under their lids, on Henry. ‘I wonder how much of you *has* been blown to blazes?’

‘I have no way of knowing,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you have?’

‘Chocolate cake?’ said Maria.

‘Please’

For chocolate layer cake, the Vesey cook had been famous since Henry was a boy of seven or eight. The look, then the taste, of the brown segment linked him with Sunday afternoons when he had been brought here by his mother, then, with a phase of his adolescence when he had been unable to eat, only able to look round Mrs Vesey’s beauty, at that time approaching its last lunar quarter, had swum on him when he was about nineteen. In Maria, child of her brother’s late marriage, he now saw that beauty, or sort of physical genius, at the start. In Maria, this was without hesitation, without the halting influence that had bound Mrs Vesey up – yes and bound Henry up, from his boyhood, with her – in a circle of quizzical half-smiles. In revenge, he accused the young girl who moved him – who seemed framed,

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

by some sort of anticipation, for the new catastrophic outward order of life – of brutality, of being without spirit. At his age, between two generations, he felt cast out. He felt Mrs Vesey might not forgive him for having left her for a world at war.

Mrs Vesey blew out the blue flame under the kettle, and let the silver trapdoor down with a snap. She then gave exactly one of those smiles – at the same time, it was the smile of his mother's friend. Ronald Cuffe picked the petal from the sandwiches and rolled it between his fingers, waiting for her to speak.

'It is cold, *indoors*,' said Mrs Vesey. 'Maria, put another log on the fire – Ria, you say the most unfortunate things. We must remember Henry has had a shock – Henry, let us talk about something better. You work in an office, then, since the war?"'

'In a Ministry – in an office, yes.'

'Very hard? – Maria, that is all you would do if you went to England work in an office. This is not like a war in history, you know.'

Maria said 'It is not in history yet.' She licked round her lips for the rest of the chocolate taste, then pushed her chair a little back from the table. She looked secretively at her wrist-watch. Henry wondered what the importance of time could be.

He learned what the importance of time was when, on his way down the avenue to the bus, he found Maria between two chestnut trees. She slanted up to him and put her hand on the inside of his elbow. Faded dark-pink stamen from the flowers above them had moulted down on to her hair. 'You have ten minutes more, really,' she said. 'They sent you off ten minutes before your time. They are frightened someone would miss the

THE DEMON LOVER

bus and come back, then everything would have to begin again As it is always the same, you would not think it would be so difficult for my aunt'

'Don't talk like that, it's unfeeling, I don't like it,' said Henry, stiffening his elbow inside Maria's grasp

'Very well, then walk to the gate, then back I shall be able to hear your bus coming It's true what they said - I'm intending to go away They will have to make up something without me'

'Maria, I can't like you Everything you say is destructive and horrible'

'Destructive? - I thought you didn't mind'

'I still want the past'

'Then how weak you are,' said Maria 'At tea I admired you The past - things done over and over again with more trouble than they were ever worth' - However, there's no time to talk about that Listen, Henry I must have your address I suppose you *have* an address now" She stopped him, just inside the white gate with the green drippings here he blew stamen off a page of his notebook, wrote on the page and tore it out for her 'Thank you,' said Maria, 'I might turn up - if I wanted money, or anything But there will be plenty to do I can drive a car'

Henry said 'I want you to understand that I won't be party to this - *in any way*'

She shrugged and said 'You want *them* to understand' - and sent a look back to the house Whereupon, on his entire being, the suspended charm of the afternoon worked He protested against the return to the zone of death, and perhaps never ever seeing all this again The cruciform lilac flowers, in all their purples, and the colourless mountains behind Mrs Vesey's face besought

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

him The moment he had been dreading, returning desire, flooded him in this tunnel of avenue, with motors swishing along the road outside and Maria standing staring at him He adored the stoicism of the group he had quitted - with their little fears and their great doubts - the grace of the thing done over again He thought, with nothing left but our brute courage, we shall be nothing but brutes

'What is the matter?' Maria said Henry did not answer they turned and walked to and fro inside the gates Shadow played over her dress and hair feeling the disenchantedness of his look at her she asked again, uneasily, 'What's the matter?'

'You know,' he said, 'when you come away from here, no one will care any more that you are Maria You will no longer be Maria, as a matter of fact Those looks, those things that are said to you - they make you, you silly little girl You are you only inside their spell You may think action is better - but who will care for you when you only act? You will have an identity number, but no identity Your whole existence has been in contradistinction You may think you want an ordinary fate - but there is no ordinary fate And that extraordinariness in the fate of each of us is only recognized by your aunt I admit that her view of life is too much for me - that is why I was so stiff and touchy today But where shall we be when nobody has a view of life?'

'You don't expect me to understand you, do you?'

'Even your being a savage, even being scornful - yes, even that you have got from them - Is that my bus?'

'At the other side of the river it has still got to cross the bridge - Henry - ' she put her face up He touched it

THE DEMON LOVER

with kisses thoughtful and cold ‘Goodbye,’ he said,
‘Miranda’

‘— Maria — ’

‘Miranda This is the end of *you* Perhaps it is just as
well ’

‘I’ll be seeing you — ’

‘You’ll come round my door in London — with your
little new number chained to your wrist ’

‘The trouble with you is, you’re half old ’

Maria ran out through the gates to stop the bus, and
Henry got on to it and was quickly carried away

*

THE INHERITED CLOCK

*

‘YES, I can see you now,’ said Aunt Addie, ‘skipping about the terrace at Sandyhill in your little scarlet highwayman coat. I think I had never seen you in such high spirits. It was such a beautiful March day, hazy, but warm and sunny, and Cousin Rosanna and your mother and I were in the winter-garden with the door open. Each time you came dancing down our end of the terrace you would toss your curls and go dancing away again. Your mother feared you were over-excited, I said, “It’s the spring, perhaps”, but Cousin Rosanna said, “Not at all it’s the clock”. We three had come down for the day, Paul was staying with her. I don’t remember where *he* was at the time. I’m afraid probably sulking somewhere about the place.’

‘I remember my coat,’ said her niece Clara, ‘but I don’t remember the day. What has made you think of it?’

‘As you know, I was at Sandyhill yesterday they are taking two more of Cousin Rosanna’s servants, so she has decided to close some more of the house, including that little ante-room through to the library. She had been hesitating whether to move the clock before I left, after tea, she had made up her mind not to – that might have meant some unnecessary jolt or jar. “How it is to travel to Clara’s, ultimately”, she said, “is not my affair. I am taking no risks with it during my own lifetime.”’

Clara surprised, said ‘Travel to me?’

THE DEMON LOVER

'That will have to be thought of, of course, dear '
'But what clock are you talking about?'

Miss Detter began to say something, tripped up, glanced askance at her niece, then turned an unhappy red, as though Clara had said something irreligious 'Why, yours - the one she is leaving to you,' she said 'You know she refers to that constantly, in your presence That skeleton clock that you like so much How can you look so blank? Cousin Rosanna would be quite hurt if she thought it meant as little as that to you It was the discussion yesterday, whether or not to move it, that brought back that day when you wore - '

'My scarlet coat Yes, but why?'

'As we watched you through the door of the winter-garden, Cousin Rosanna turned and said to your mother, "I have been telling Clara that, ultimately, she is to have the clock" Your mother, knowing what a part the clock had played in Rosanna's life, was much touched There was a good deal of bustle, I remember, about getting us off to the train, it being discovered, just before we started, that you had hurt the poor little forefinger of your right hand It was really rather a shocking sight black and blue with several small ugly cuts You were loyally mum about what had happened, but we all suspected that Master Paul had been up to some more cruel tricks This, naturally, made you a little nervous in the train So your mother, hoping to cheer you up, said, "So, Clara, when Cousin Rosanna goes to Heaven she is going to send you her lovely skeleton clock" I don't know whether it was the idea of Cousin Rosanna going away to Heaven, or whether the word "skeleton" frightened you, but you burst into tears and became almost hysterical Not liking to see

THE INHERITED CLOCK

you cry in a railway carriage, I said, "You know the reason Cousin Rosanna loves it? It has not stopped ticking for more than a hundred years!" But that only seemed to unsettle you still more'

'Well, if you say this happened, Aunt Addie, of course it did,' Clara said - with a somehow encaged and rebellious feeling 'I know I was six the winter I had that coat. I am thirty now - one cannot expect to remember everything'

'Yes, I remember you before you remember yourself,' said Aunt Addie, looking at her affectionately 'Of course, I have always taken an interest in you - but then, you have always taken an interest in yourself. I don't mean that unkindly why shouldn't you? You have an exceptional character'

'Only to you, I think'

'At least,' Aunt Addie said, in a brisker tone, 'you will make a point, won't you, next time you're at Sandyhill, of saying something enthusiastic about the clock? Let her see how much you are looking forward to it'

'Might that not seem - ?'

'Why, Clara? You know Cousin Rosanna likes you and Paul to be perfectly natural about the money, and if about money why not about the clock, when she so much connects it with you in her own mind?'

There was, it was true, a singular lack of nonsense about Rosanna Detter's relations with her two young heirs. She had named them as such early on in their infancy, made a point of having them frequently at her house, and insisted that their expectations should be discussed and defined. The contents of her will had long ago been made known, and she proposed, she said,

THE DEMON LOVER

in ordinary fairness to make no changes in it without warning. Apart from bequests to charities, legacies to old servants and £5000 for Addie Detter (who had declared fervently this was much too much) Rosanna's fortune was to be divided equally between Paul Ardeen and Clara Detter, respectively son and daughter of two of her first cousins, and, thus, second cousins to one another. Clara lived, as a child, with her widowed mother in a small house in Ealing, Paul with his not prosperous doctor father on the outskirts of an industrial town; the two young people's surroundings, as well as their temperaments, could not fail to attach them to their auspicious future. Meanwhile, Cousin Rosanna made them no allowances and few presents — though there were times when the watchful Clara suspected that Rosanna paid the more pressing of Paul's debts.

It gratified Cousin Rosanna, herself an only child, to watch these two high-spirited only children quarrel. Their co-heirship had not created a happy tie. Dark bullet-headed Paul, at once cool and bragging, and blonde fine-strung Clara, with her fairy-like affectations, seldom relaxed, during visits to Sandyhill, their resourceful campaign against one another. Cousin Rosanna, in packing them off to play (for she could tolerate neither for very long at a time) could assure herself that they were equally tough. The children worked on each other like two indestructible pieces of sand-paper. It might have been thought that Rosanna, in selecting heirs near in age and of opposite sexes, entertained some romantic spinsterish project that they should marry, and that their declared hostility pleased her as being, admittedly, the first phase of love. This cannot have been so, for Paul's marriage, at twenty-two, was, by all showing, not

THE INHERITED CLOCK

adversely seen It was Clara, surprisingly, who was piqued She perceived, if Rosanna chose to ignore, a touch of Paul's usual insolence in the choice The fortunate Edmée – blonde like Clara, but of how different a type – was to be recognized, at the first glance, as being just one more in the succession of fancies with whom Paul by habit went round town nor did she show any reason why she should be the last Summoned for the occasion to Sandyhill, Clara stood by at the presentation of the heavy-lidded bride She was able to watch Paul fold, with expressionless satisfaction, preparatory to slipping into his wallet, Rosanna's five-hundred-pound cheque for the honeymoon

It had been two years later, when she was twenty-one, that Clara met her fate in the person of Henry Harley, who, already a married man, was forced to tell her that he saw little prospect of changing his way of life He was not well off, his wife had been irreproachable, the payment of alimony would cripple him, and he was not disposed to let scandal prejudice his career She chose to continue obstinate in her feeling, and in her hopes of things taking a better turn Her poverty, to which one dared set no term, meanwhile made everything more difficult the circumstances under which their affair was conducted constantly alarmed Henry and oppressed her This had gone on now for nine years, and provided the reason why Clara at thirty was unmarried As the years went by, she became increasingly grateful to Cousin Rosanna for either her resolute ignorance or her tolerance, and she had reproached herself, before the war started, for not going down more often to Sandyhill Since the war, she was tied to exacting work, also, the closing of that coastal area interdicted visits from London – except,

THE DEMON LOVER

of course, on the plea of family business that could from time to time be produced Cousin Rosanna's influence in her neighbourhood was more considerable than one ought, these days, to admit The officially dangerous position of Sandyhill disqualified the house as a hospital or a repository for children, but also, so far no soldiers had been billeted there And she had kept intact, until very lately, her staff of middle-aged servants

Sandyhill itself was to go to Paul, who did not conceal his intention of selling it It might do well, he expected, for a private asylum, when peace should bring back happier days The house *had*, it is true, already in some ways, the look of an institution, though of an expensive kind it stood among pleasure-grounds dark with ilex, girt by a high flint wall The avenue ran downhill between ramparts of evergreen, to debouch into the main street of an unassuming seaside resort Sandyhill had been built by Rosanna's great-uncle, from whom (fairly late in her own life) she had inherited it, with substantial wealth cleverly sheltered by trees from the sea winds, it faced south and enjoyed a good deal of sunshine From the terrace, from the adjoining winter-garden and from the plate-glass windows upstairs and down, you also enjoyed, if this were your pleasure, a view of the Channel above the ilex groves Indoors, the rooms were powerfully heated, brocade-papered, and so planned that you looked through an enfilade of pine-framed doorways They composed a museum of discredited *objets d'art* which, up to now, had been always specklessly kept

In one of the hollows about the grounds had been placed a small lake, sunless most of the day and overlooked by a kiosk Into this lake had dropped, since Clara's last visit, what had so far been Sandyhill's only

THE INHERITED CLOCK

bomb, the blast had wrenched the shutters off the kiosk, and, by a freak of travel, obliterated the glass winter-garden projecting west of the house This day of Clara's return, not long after the conversation with Aunt Addie, was an almost eerie extension of her aunt's memory it was in March, 'hazy, but warm and sunny' Clara and Cousin Rosanna lunched in the morning-room 'As Addie no doubt will have told you, they've taken Preeps and Marchant, so I have closed the dining-room and the library' Nodding towards a door on her left hand, Cousin Rosanna added 'Therefore the house stops there'

'May I look, later?'

Cousin Rosanna stared 'By all means, if you are interested in dust-sheets' Her eyes, always prominent, were today more so about her face and her manner appeared the something you less at the time observe than afterwards recollect - *then*, you say you saw the beginning of the end At sixty-five, the big woman was to be felt contracting, withdrawing from life with the same heavy indifference with which she withdrew her life from room after room Clara did notice that her dictatorial 'ultimatelys' were fewer Though lunch was served with most of its old formality the dried-egg omelette was rubbery the contempt with which Cousin Rosanna ate it had been, more, a contempt for her own palate, that with impunity one could now insult

She now, by abruptly turning her chair to the fire, implied she had left the table her guest could do as she liked Clara, accordingly, rose and went frankly straight to the door where the house had been forced by war to stop This led to the ante-room which, in its turn, led to the library At once, she could hear a clock expectantly

THE DEMON LOVER

ticking The ante-room french window was shuttered up only cracks of light from the terrace fell on the shrouded sofa and off the sheet tucked bibwise over the bookcase on which the clock stood The gleam of the glass of the dome inside which the ticking proceeded was just, but only just, to be seen

'What are you up to in there?' called out Cousin Rosanna 'Looking at your clock?'

'I can't see it, yet'

'Well, you ought to know what it looks like, goodness knows!'

Clara did not reply Her cousin, restless, repeated 'What are you doing now?'

'Opening a shutter - may I?'

'If you shut it again You haven't got Preeps and Marchant to dance round clearing up after you now, you know'

The skeleton clock, in daylight, was threatening to a degree its oddness could not explain Looking through the glass at its wheels, cogs, springs and tensions, and at its upraised striker, awaiting with a sensible quiver the finish of the hour that was in force, Clara tried to tell herself that it was, only, shocking to see the anatomy of time The clock was without a face, its twelve numerals being welded on to a just visible wire ring As she watched, the minute hand against its background of nothing made one, then another, spectral advance This was enough if she did not yet feel she could anticipate feeling her sanity being demolished, by one degree more, as every sixtieth second brought round this unheard click Retreating, she looked round the walls of the ante-room she saw the dark-patterned oblongs where the pictures had hung She could remem-

THE INHERITED CLOCK

ber which picture used to hang in each oblong, she remembered the names of the books in the bookcase under the sheet

But as far as she knew she had not seen the clock before
‘None the worse, you see,’ vouchsafed Cousin Rosanna,
as Clara returned to the morning-room

‘You mean,’ Clara said with an effort, ‘the same as ever?’
‘No, I don’t, I mean none the worse for the bomb
As it stood up to that, it should see *you* out, we may hope
So you can take it for granted, as I have done, instead of
rushing to look for it every time you come here’ Cousin
Rosanna, however, did not seem wholly displeased

‘Do I really?’ said Clara, trying to smile this off
‘Unless you walk in your sleep, and sleep in daytime,
in which case you had better go to the doctor – Have
you seen the winter-garden?’

‘No yet, I –’
‘It isn’t there – By the way, you will have to see that
that clock’s attended to I have had the same man, out
from Southstone, to wind it for twenty-four years he
took on when that previous poor fellow – shocking
affair that was! – And another thing keep a careful eye
on Paul, or he’ll get his hands on it before you can say
knife However, you don’t need me to tell you *that*!’

‘No, no, of course not, Cousin Rosanna He wants it
so much,’ Clara added, as though musingly

‘For the reason we know,’ said Rosanna, with a pro-
tuberant meaning stare ‘You know really, Clara, in
view of all, you ought not to begrudge Paul that one bit
of fun Dear me, a cat would have laughed, and I must
say I did I can see you now –’

‘I was wearing my scarlet coat?’
‘Scarlet? Good heavens no, at least, I should hope not:

THE DEMON LOVER

you were fat to be wearing scarlet at fourteen Not that, with you standing there with that glass thing over your head, one looked twice at whatever else you had on However — “Now then, Paul,” I said, “that’s enough” She can’t breathe in there take it off her — However,’ concluded Cousin Rosanna, who for the first time today showed genuine pleasure, ‘easier said than done’ Her mood changed, she looked at Clara with moody boredom ‘Did you say you wanted to go for a turn?’ she said ‘Because if that’s what you want you had better go’

Clara was fat no longer that growing phase had been brief Today her step on the terrace, if more assertive, was not much heavier than it had been as a child’s Her height and her feverish fair good looks were set off by clothes that showed an expensive taste — taste that she could not fully indulge, yet She glanced, without shock as without feeling, at the site of the winter-garden — here some exotic creepers had already perished against the exposed wall Then she slanted downwards across the lawn, into one of the paths that entered the woods of ilex These sombre pleasure-grounds, unchanging as might have been a photograph of themselves, were charged for her with a past that, though discontinuous, maintained a continuous atmosphere of its own To these she had sometimes escaped, they had equally been the scene of those inescapable games with Paul She could have thought she heard what war had suspended — still dead leaves being brushed from hard paths with stiff brooms To each cut-out of a branch against the diluted sky attached some calculation or fear or unhopeful triumph Every glade, every seat, every vista at the turn of a path only drew out the story To be coming, for

THE INHERITED CLOCK

instance, into view of the lake, and of the kiosk reflected in its apathetic water, was to breathe the original horror of Paul's telling her that 'they' kept the headless ladies locked up in there. He had looked in, he told her, between the slats of the shutters, but could not advise her to do the same. Now, with the shutters gone, she saw mildewed inside walls as she stared at the kiosk, like someone performing an exercise, even lungfuls of horror seemed salutary. No, there was nothing, no single thing, in the history of Clara at Sandyhill that she could not remember — Yet, was there?

With regard to no place other than Sandyhill could this opening and splitting wider of a crevasse in her memory have alarmed her more. At its deepness, she dared not attempt to guess, its extent, if it ever did stop, must simply wait to be seen.

That, as things turned out, was to be Clara's last visit to Sandyhill, except for the day of Cousin Rosanna's funeral. Neither Clara nor Paul received any deathbed summons; their cousin's loss of interest must have been so entire that she could not be bothered putting them through the last hoop. The funeral was correct but for one detail — Paul failed to be there. Stationed far up north, he had (his telegram told them) missed the necessary train. Clara returned to London that same evening, leaving Aunt Addie at Sandyhill to console the servants and to receive Paul whenever he should arrive. A week later, fairly late in the evening, Aunt Addie came staggering into Clara's St. John's Wood flat with the clock embraced inside her exhausted arms. It was not packed — in a packing-case it might have got knocked about, in which case it might have stopped. As it was,

THE DEMON LOVER

it had gone on ticking, and had struck twice in the train, to the interest of everyone, and once again in the lift, coming up here to Clara's flat

'I took the precaution of travelling first class,' Aunt Addie said 'I knew you would want to have it as soon as possible' Look, I am putting it *here*, for the time being' – (that meant, the only table the size of the room allowed) – 'but when I get my breath back, we'll put it where you intend You must often have seen it here, in your mind's eye – Not, I hope, on anything it could fall off?'

'In that case, I can only think of the floor '

'Oh,' said Aunt Addie, preoccupied, 'I seem to have left fingerprints on the dome' She breathed on the glass and began to polish them off 'Naturally, you have had a good deal to think about In fact, I should not be surprised if this changed the course of your life '

'A clock – how could it?' said Clara wildly

'No, I was referring to Cousin Rosanna's death, dear I could already see some little changes in Paul '

'By the way, did Paul say anything when you took the clock?'

'Er, no,' said Aunt Addie, colouring faintly 'He was not about, as it happened, he was so busy '

Clara's life, ever since she had been told of the will (which was practically as far back as she could remember) had, of course, hinged on the prospect of this immense change Not unreasonably, she expected everything to go better She perceived that her nature was of the kind that is only able to flower in clement air either wealth or reciprocal love, ideally both, were necessary To begin with, she intended to buy herself surroundings that suited her, that would set her off But chiefly, as her obsessive love for Henry became, in the course of nine

THE INHERITED CLOCK

years, the centre of everything, she had quite simply looked to her coming money for the one consummation of this marriage. The humiliating uncertainties of their relationship, and, still more, the thought of him living there with his wife, were more of a torment than she had dared to allow. Humble about herself with regard to him, and humbly bare of illusions regarding Henry, she believed that her, Clara's, coming into her money would be the one thing needed to make him break with his wife. Should his career show damage from the divorce proceedings, he could afford to abandon it; she could compensate him. She could buy open some other door for his ambition. As for love — so far Henry had only loved her, as you might say, on trust. She had yet to gain him wholly by showing what she could, in the whole, be. Now she could feel the current of her nature stirring strongly under the thinning ice. Had it been the strength of the current that thinned the ice? Or had the ice had to be thinned by the breath of financial summer before the current, however strong, could be felt?

When Aunt Addie had gone, Clara tried again to realize all that was now, since last week, within her reach. She went across to the mirror and stood and stared at herself imperiously. But the current, without warning, ceased to be felt; no kind of exultation was possible. The newly-arrived clock, chopping off each second to fall and perish, recalled how many seconds had gone to make up her years, how many of these had been either null or bitter, how many had been void before the void claimed them. She had been subject to waiting as to an illness, the tissues of her being had been consumed by it. Was it impossible that the past should be able to injure the future irreparably? Turning away

THE DEMON LOVER

from the mirror, she made herself face the clock, she looked through into the nothing behind its hands
Turning away from the clock, she went to the telephone

Henry's reply, at the same time cautious and social, warned her that, as so often at this hour, he was not alone — All the same ‘What do you think? My clock has arrived,’ she said ‘Aunt Addie has just brought it, from Sandyhill’

‘Indeed Which is that?’

‘Which clock? Surely you know, Henry The one I must have so often told you about Didn't I? Well, it's with me now, in this room Can you hear it ticking?’

‘No, I'm afraid not’

She got up, pulling the telephone with her as far as the cord would go, then stretched the receiver at arm's length towards the glass dome After some seconds she went on ‘You heard it *that* time? I like to think we are hearing the same thing They say it has never stopped for more than a hundred years don't you think it sounds like that? Cousin Rosanna insisted I was to have this clock’

‘Thrown in,’ Henry said, ‘with the pound of tea’ But his voice, besides being ironical, was distract all the time, he was thinking up some story that could account for his end of the conversation, and was being careful to make, in his wife's hearing, no remark that would not fit in with that

‘Yes,’ said Clara, quivering, ‘with, with my pound of tea Do you think that could mean she did really care for me? I wish I could think so There is something frightening about the death of someone who always kept one so near her, without love Still, there it is she's dead And because of that — Henry, tell me again that you're glad?’

THE INHERITED CLOCK

'Of course'

'For both our sakes - yours and mine?'

'Of course Well, this has been nice, but I fear I must say good night We were thinking of listening to the European news'

'Stop, wait, don't go for a minute! I can't bear this clock! I dread it, I can't stay with it in the room! What am I to do this evening? Where can I go?'

'I'm afraid I can't think, really'

'There's no *possible* chance you ?'

'No, I'm afraid not'

'But you do love me?'

'Of course'

So Clara, to stop herself thinking, rang up two or three friends, but not one of them answered their telephones went on ringing Therefore she put on her overcoat, found her torch, dropped down in the lift and went for a walk in the black-out It was late enough for the streets to be almost empty Clara, walking at high speed into the solid darkness, was surprised all over her body to feel no impact she seemed to pass like a ghost through an endless wall No segment of moon peered at her, no stars guided Brought to a halt for breath, she began to spy with her torch at the things round her - a post-box, a corner with no railing, the white plate of a street-name Nothing told her anything, except one thing - unless she had lost her memory, she had lost her way She dived into a wardens' post to ask where this was, or where she was, and in the glare in there they all stared at her 'Where did you want to get back to?' someone said, and for either a second or an eternity she fancied she might be unable to tell him When Clara once again found herself at the portico of the block of flats

THE DEMON LOVER

where she lived, tomorrow had begun to curdle the sky Having hesitated with her key in her own door she let herself in and went quickly through to her bedroom But the wall between herself and the clock was thin Getting up, lying down, getting up, she continued, until her telephone called her, her search for the ear-plugs that Aunt Addie had given her when first the raids began

When Aunt Addie rang up, two mornings later, it was to announce that, after a search of London, she *had* succeeded in finding an old man to wind the clock 'I knew you'd be anxious, I know I was! Providentially, however, I am in time'

'In time for what?'

'For the day it is always wound So you will know when to expect the man,' said Aunt Addie

Therefore Clara, who started for work at cock-crow, not to return till some time on in the evening, told the porter to admit, on whichever day he should come, an old man to wind the clock in her flat The day must have been Friday, for that evening she came home to find a door ajar There was somebody, besides the clock, in possession — this turned out to be Paul Having arranged the black-out and turned the lights on, he was comfortably sitting on her sofa, smoking one of his superior cigarettes He was, of course, in khaki 'Really, what hours you keep!' he said 'However, I've had my dinner I trust you have?' At this point, as though recollecting himself, Paul sprang up and smote Clara matly on the shoulder He then stood back to inspect her 'Radiant — and can one wonder?' he added 'By the way, I was sorry to miss you the other day I hope I wasn't missed?'

'At the funeral? Everyone thought that looked pretty

THE INHERITED CLOCK

queer, and Cousin Rosanna, of course, would have been furious'

'If so, most unfairly I missed my train that morning because I had made a night of it, and I made a night of it because I felt like hell You might not think so, and I was surprised myself' After all, she had never wanted anything'

'Never wanted us to love her?'

'Well, if you put it that way - never gave us a chance However, I snapped out of that I feel fine now'

'How nice How is Edmée?'

'I thought her looking wonderfully herself And how is Henry? As nice as ever?'

Clara said frigidly 'How did you get in?'

'A civil old burglar, or somebody, let me in He said nothing to me, so I said nothing to him He put the glass back on the clock and went away quietly, so I decided to wait'

Paul, whose way of standing about was characteristic, did not seem disposed to sit down again Having flicked ash into a shell not meant for an ashtray, he remained with his back to the mantelpiece, fixing on nothing particular his tolerant, narrow-eyed, level look His uniform fitted and suited him just a degree too well, and gave him the air of being on excellent terms with war He had thickened slightly otherwise, little change appeared in the dark bullet-head, rather Mongolian features and compact, tactile hands that had made him by turns agreeably disagreeable and disagreeably agreeable as a little boy 'Tick-tock, tick-tock,' he said, out of the blue 'Sounds louder than ever, in here, though as nice as ever, of course You don't think it's a little large for the room?'

THE DEMON LOVER

'I shall be moving soon, I expect,' said Clara, who had not only sat down but put her feet up on her sofa, to show that Paul's presence affected her in no sort of way

'Oh, shall you really? How right' Paul glanced down at the toe of one shoe, lifted his eyebrows and went on 'This isn't, of course, a point I should ever bother to raise, but you do of course realize that nothing should have left Sandyhill until the valuation had been made for probate'

'I don't suppose Aunt Addie understood that You could always have stopped her'

'On the contrary the devoted creature nipped off to the train with the clock while my back was turned When I thought of your face at this end, I must say I had to smile'

'Really,' said Clara touchily, 'why?'

Paul not only looked at his cousin but, somehow, gave the impression that only indolence kept him from looking harder 'It is just as well, as we both see now,' he observed, 'that the point of that joke is known only to you and me That you have never enjoyed it seems unfair Still, I suppose it is partly in view of that that I've come round this evening to do the handsome thing—'

'Yes, I wondered what you had come about'

'I make you an offer, Clara I'll buy you out of the clock Cash down — as soon as I touch the cash'

Clara, not so much as raising her eyes from her rather too delicate ringless hands, said 'Cousin Rosanna warned me this might happen'

'What you mean — and how stupid of me, and how right you are — is that cash is no longer an object with you, either? Look, I'll go one better I'll take the clock away for nothing And better still, I'll take it away tonight'

THE INHERITED CLOCK

Clara went rigid immediately her cheeks flamed and her voice shot into the particular note for so long familiar to her and Paul

‘Why should you take it simply because you want it?’

‘Why should you keep it when you don’t want it, simply because I do?’ Even Paul’s imperturbability showed, as of old, a crack ‘Well, we both know why – and better leave it at that All the same, Clara, have some sense It’s one thing to cut your nose off to spite my face But is it really worth going crackers?’

‘Crackers – what do you mean?’

‘Well, look at yourself in the glass’

The mirror being exactly opposite the sofa, Clara had looked before she could stop herself As quickly, she said ‘I don’t see anything wrong And didn’t you say I was looking radiant?’

‘Because, frankly, my one thought was, “We must keep her calm”’ Paul, having ground out his cigarette with an air at once resigned and concerned, came to sit down on the sofa beside Clara He pushed her feet off gently to make room for himself Leaning a little towards her, he placed one hand, like a hostage, or like an invitation to read his entire motive, palm upwards on the brocade between them His nearness enveloped Clara in a sense of complicity, frightening because it was acutely familiar, more frightening because she could not guess at its source While his eyes expressed no more than good-natured fondness, and his manner regretful conciliation, both conveyed a threat for which no memory could account ‘I hate,’ he said, ‘to see you all shot up Doesn’t Henry?’

‘Why should he? I haven’t asked him’

Her cousin, at once quickly and darkly, said ‘Possibly

THE DEMON LOVER

better not I'm all, if we can, for keeping this in the family"

'The clock?'

'No, I mean its effect on you When you think it's only three days since Aunt Addie imported it - And to think how well she meant, the old dear!'

Rearing up among the cushions at her end of the sofa, Clara exclaimed 'You think that will work? Cousin Rosanna intended the clock for me So this is just one thing you must do without I would sooner drop it out of the window

'I am sure you would,' said Paul 'In fact, I expect, you've tried?'

He was right Once in the small hours of a sleepless night, once on the occasion of an unnerving return home, that solution had already offered itself Clara had turned the lights out, opened her eighth-floor window, found her way to the clock by the noise it made in the dark and gone so far as to balance it on the window-sill In her finger-tips, as they supported it, could be felt its confident vibration - through the dome, through the stand projecting some inches into the night She had awaited in vain some infinitesimal check, some involuntary metallic shudder with which the clock should anticipate its last second, the first it would not consume for a hundred years Annihilation waited - the concrete roadway under the block of flats By the concrete roadway the clock would be struck, not to strike again Towards the dawn of the coming unthreatened day, some early goer to work would halt, step back and bend his torch on the cogs, uncoiled springs and incomprehensible splinters that had startled him by crunching under his boot - But, suppose not Suppose gravity

THE INHERITED CLOCK

failed? Or suppose the tick stayed up here without the clock, or the nothing that had shown through its skeleton form continued to bear its skeleton shadow? If what she purposed to do could *be* done, how was it it had never been done before? Clara, quailing, hoped that she only did so before the conventionality of her own nature. She was not the woman, it seemed (if there were indeed such a woman) who could drop a clock from the window of a St John's Wood flat. The chance of somebody passing at the decisive second, the immediate alarm to be raised by what would sound like a bomb, the likelihood of the affair being traced to her, the attention already drawn to the clock by its sentimental arrival with Aunt Addie and her own talk about it with the flats porter – all these Clara, too gladly, let weigh with her. She reprieved not so much the clock as her own will. She had returned the clock to its place on the table – twice.

'However,' Paul said, 'if that's how you feel I let you see that I want it – apparently, that's enough.' He shrugged his shoulders, and slowly withdrew his hand. The interlude of frankness could be taken as over. Getting up, he strolled across to the clock, and, taking up his stand between it and Clara, could be felt to hold communication with it. Intently stooping, he squinted into its works. 'Yes,' he said remotely, 'I am stuck on this clock. Always have been, and I suppose always shall.'

'Why?'

'Why should there be any why?' said Paul, without turning round. 'I am simply stuck on this clock. One is bound to be stuck on something. What is wrong with a clock? Your trouble seems to be that you are stuck on the past.'

THE DEMON LOVER

Clara, eyes indecisively on Paul's khaki back, licked her lips once or twice before she actually spoke Then she cried 'Have you *no* idea that I've no idea what you mean? Or Cousin Rosanna, or Aunt Addie either? Unless you three are combining to send me mad, someone had better tell me what this *is* all about As far as I know, the first time I saw that clock was the last day I spent with Rosanna at Sandyhill I detest it, and should be glad if you'd tell me why Every time I am told I remember something I don't remember, it turns out to be something about that clock, and there's such high feeling about it I don't know which way to turn - Did you, for instance, once put the clock-glass over my head, and did I get stuck inside it?"

This engaged Paul's attention he turned round slowly, gained time by soundlessly whistling, then said 'You're not serious?' He considered her 'But what a thing to forget! We damn' nearly chipped your face off Besides, that came quite late on '

'But, late on in what?'

'In our story If you'll tell me how much you've forgotten, I'll tell you where we begin If you *have* forgotten, you must have some rather too good reason - in which case, don't I err in bringing the whole thing up? . Very well Yes, I popped that thing over your head because it was time to stop you, and I thought that might do it Stop you what? Stop you blackmailing me We were by then no longer in the Garden of Eden, and I observed Rosanna showing the red light' - At this point, Paul gave Clara a final suspicious look what he saw appeared to convince him, for he went on 'Since the day we did that with the clock you had almost never let up It was, "Oh, Paul, I feel so wicked, we've been

THE INHERITED CLOCK

so wicked, I have simply got to confess to Cousin Rosanna!" Then, "Very well, kiss me, then perhaps I'll feel better, then perhaps I won't have to tell Cousin Rosanna *this time* " And this year in, yea* out, my sweet, every holidays you and I were at Sandyhill Castor oil got to be lovely compared to your upturned face Your particular *mise en scène* was the ante-room you used to put your ear to the clock glass and say, "You know, it *still* doesn't sound the same " That meant your feeling bad and my having to come across To make things more interesting, one could never be certain that Rosanna might not pop in at one or the other door, not to speak of her passing the terrace window You and me on such close terms (she wasn't to know the reason) and, of all places, right there by her precious clock – that *would* have finally torn it, for you and me '

'You don't mean, she'd have cut us out of the will?'

'Well, Clara, ask yourself – would she not? Given, I mean, that peculiar obsession *she* had '

'If Rosanna had an obsession, I don't remember that, either ' She attempted a wintry smile, and added 'This seems to be like a whole continent that's submerged, you know '

'Poetic idea,' Paul conceded, with a glance to the left of his cousin's ear 'To return to Cousin Rosanna – you know how when you are waiting you have to look back and back again at the clock? Now our friend, as it happened, had been Rosanna's from girlhood, so it was this clock she connected with her particular habit – a habit she'd had every reason to form There was nothing Rosanna did not know about waiting Great-uncle, from whom she got Sandyhill and the money, did not quit the stage till she was well on in life Therefore

THE DEMON LOVER

Rosanna waited, throughout what are called one's best years — not only for money, exactly like you and me, but for a young man, like, if I may say so, you. The young man — not a nice character, unlike Henry — wasn't moving till Rosanna could declare the bank open. Great-uncle, unfriendly to romance, lived just too long by the time the money came to Rosanna; the man had lost heart and married somebody else. And in those days, if you remember, that was considered final. So Rosanna, like the great girl she was, in her way, cut her losses in the romance direction and went all out to make the money her big thing. She felt free, all things considered, to buy what she liked with it, she jingled her new purse and looked around for her fun. You and I were her fun. Can't you see how the thing worked out? The younger the heirs you name, the longer they have to wait, and the more the waiting can do to them. Again, *she'd* expected both love and money, and got money only — can you blame her if she was damned if *she'd* contemplate you and me, or you or me, having both? So my marriage — than which I'm sure there are many worse — and your, er, stalemate with regard to Henry, suited her book ideally — couldn't have suited better. As for you and me, biting bits out of each other all over Sandyhill — how her dear old good face used to light up! The better we loathed each other, the better she liked us. But then came what looked like our interlude — that *that* was no more than a new and more subtle manifestation of mutual hate was, I suppose unavoidably lost on her. Therefore that, as I tell you, did damn' nearly cook our goose.'

'How ironical,' supplied Clara, 'that would have been, we well know — All the same, what made her so set on my having to have the clock?'

THE INHERITED CLOCK

'I can only think, because you were a fellow-woman
It was Rosanna's way of saying, "Over to you!"'

'But, so equally set on the clock never being yours?'

'That couldn't be clearer I'd more than shown that
I liked it, I'd asked her for it point-blank I was a man,
so she liked my going without Yes, I did get those
cheques, I know - as you also noted She liked me to
make a fool of myself *qua* man I wanted the clock,
so you were to have it - could the mental process be more
straightforward? Yes, I tell you, I asked for it I
was a fool, at nine, and that clock was the only thing in
that god-awful house I liked So I piped up That was
the day our bit of trouble began

'It was one of those typical headache Sandyhill March
mornings - house heated to bursting-point and a livery
sun outdoors A family gathering was in progress - you
and your aunt and your mother had come down for the
day I mouldered off by myself, as I frequently did do,
to watch the old clock at its cheering work Rosanna
came in and said, "You like that, don't you?" to which I
said, "Yes, I should like to have it" To which she said,
"Yes, I daresay you would" At which point you came
prancing into the room I suppose you were about six,
and your mother had got you up in a perfectly sickening
little scarlet coat, like a monkey wears on a barrel-
organ The moment was jam for Rosanna she turned to
you and she said, "Clara, one day I intend *you* to have
that clock Do you know it has never stopped, and it
never will?" You registered pleasure, and I went off
down the woods - *None* of this comes back?

'Nothing,' said Clara firmly - with growing fear

'So that really you don't remember my catching you,
later on, in the ante-room, you having glided back for a

THE DEMON LOVER

private gloat at your clock? Or what I said, or we did, or what happened then?"

"No, no! Why? What do you mean? Paul, you're simply making me worse — And what are you *doing*? Leave that alone *it's mine!*"

"That's just why I'm asking you to step over here," said Paul, who was lifting the dome with becoming care, to place it on the table beside the clock "Why? To make an experiment Let's face it Either this works — which it may not — or I take you by hand tomorrow to a psychiatrist Blood is thicker than water, after all Come on — I can't wait all night, I have got a date."

Hooking his arm round Clara's reluctant waist, Paul approached his cousin relentlessly to the clock After four or five seconds of this enforced staring into the diligent works, Clara began to relax — was she hypnotized? In the absolute nothing behind the clock's anatomy there appeared and began to dilute, like colour dropped into water, the red of the Sandyhill ante-room wallpaper meanwhile, there crept on another sense the smell of pitched pine exasperated by heating There could be felt the stare of a draped and open door-window, in which, from moment to moment, somebody might appear The murmur of voices out of the winter-garden hung on the hazy terrace behind Paul's voice

"I'll tell you something, Clara Have you ever SEEN a minute? Have you actually had one wriggling inside your hand? Did you know if you keep your finger inside a clock for a minute, you can pick out that very minute and take it home for your own?" So it is Paul who stealthily lifts the dome off It is Paul who selects the finger of Clara's that is to be guided, shrinking, then forced wincing into the works, to be wedged in them, bruised

THE INHERITED CLOCK

in them, bitten into and eaten up by the cogs '*No, you have got to keep it there, or you will lose the minute I am doing the counting – the counting up to sixty*'. But there is to be no sixty The ticking stops

We have stopped the clock

The hundred years are all angry '*Stop crying, idiot that won't start it again!*' . But oh, oh but, it won't let my finger go! O-o-h! '*Suck it, be quiet, don't make a noise!*' What have you made me do? '*You wanted to*' You made me want to What shall we, what shall we, what shall we do, do, do? '*You go out and skip about on the terrace, make them keep on watching you, then they won't come in*' But what will you do? '*Something*' But it's stopped ticking! '*I tell you, go out and skip about on the terrace*'

For the second time, Paul withdrew Clara's finger, with a painful jerk, from the clock which had stopped ticking Her finger was bitten, but not so badly it had grown too big to go in so deep this time He was, meanwhile, going on smoothly 'We were in luck that Friday – because it *was* a Friday, of course All I did was put the glass back and walk away But half an hour later, the regular chap from Southstone turned up to wind it With a mouth that butter couldn't possibly melt in, I tailed him into the ante-room, just to see The clock stopped and that half-hour missing made even him turn pale He sent me to find Rosanna I was unable to I came back to watch him put through a long and amazing job The ladies were upstairs, tying up your finger By the time he had got the clock set and going, he found he had run things fine for his bus home He decided, therefore, as Rosanna was missing, not to report the

THE DEMON LOVER

occurrence till the following week Owing to hurry or worry, the poor brute, he shot out of Sandyhill gate and across the main street in time to be flattened out by a bus coming the other way Any evidence perished with him Rosanna was spared the knowledge In gratitude, you and I subscribed sixpence each towards the funeral wreath But of course you would never remember *that*?

'I remember giving the sixpence for the wreath,' said Clara slowly, not looking up from her finger

'But only that?'

'No, *not* only that – thank you, Paul' There ensued an unavoidable pause, at the end of which Clara said 'I expect you would like to go now? I think I heard you say you had got a date?'

'Nothing need stand, if you'd rather not be alone?'

'Thank you very much, I, I shall sit with my memories I expect to spend some time getting to know them' Turning away, with all the detachment possible, she occupied herself in emptying Paul's ash from the shell into a more suitable tray 'Oh, by the way, Paul,' she added, 'do by all means have the clock Aunt Addie ought to have known that you wanted it And, apart from any sentiment of Rosanna's, it means nothing to me Won't you take it along now?'

'Thanks, that is nice of you, Clara,' said Paul promptly 'Actually, under the circumstances, I could not very easily take it along this evening, and in fact I have nowhere to put it for the duration Could you keep it for me, or would it be in your way?'

'There is no reason why it should be in my way, as I say, I expect to move to a larger flat It is not very useful at present to tell the time by, but apart from that I should never know it was there'

*

THE CHEERY SOUL

*

ON arriving, I first met the aunt of whom they had told me, the aunt who had not yet got over being turned out of Italy. She sat resentfully by the fire, or rather the fireplace, and did not look up when I came in. The acrid smell that curled through the drawing-room could be traced to a grate full of sizzling fir cones that must have been brought in damp. From the mantelpiece one lamp, with its shade tilted, shed light on the parting of the aunt's hair. It could not be said that the room was cheerful: the high, curtained bow windows made draughty caves, the armchairs and sofas, pushed back against the wall, wore the air of being renounced for ever. Only a row of discreet greeting-cards (few with pictures) along the top of a bureau betrayed the presence of Christmas. There was no holly, and no pieces of string.

I coughed and said 'I feel I should introduce myself,' and followed this up by giving the aunt my name, which she received with apathy. When she did stir, it was to look at the parcel that I coquettishly twirled from its loop of string. 'They're not giving presents, this year,' she said in alarm. 'If I were you, I should put that back in my room.'

'It's just - my rations.'

'In that case,' she remarked, 'I really don't know what you had better do.' Turning away from me she picked up a small bent poker, and with this began to interfere.

THE DEMON LOVER

with the fir cones, of which several, steaming, bounced from the grate ‘A good wood stove,’ she said, ‘would make all the difference. At Sienna, though they say it is cold in winter, we never had troubles of this kind’

‘How would it be,’ I said, ‘if I sat down?’ I pulled a chair a little on to the hearthrug, if only for the idea of the thing ‘I gather our hosts are out. I wonder where they have gone to?’

‘Really, I couldn’t tell you’

‘My behaviour,’ I said, ‘has been shockingly free-and-easy. Having pulled the bell three times, waited, had a go at the knocker’

‘. . . I heard,’ she said, slightly bowing her head

‘I gave *that* up, tried the door, found it unlocked, so just marched in’

‘Have you come about something?’ she said with renewed alarm

‘Well, actually, I fear that I’ve come to stay. They have been so very kind as to . . .’

‘Oh, I remember — someone *was* coming.’ She looked at me rather closely ‘Have you been here before?’

‘Never. So this is delightful,’ I said firmly ‘I am billeted where I work’ (I named the industrial town, twelve miles off, that was these days in a ferment of war production), ‘my landlady craves my room for these next two days for her daughter, who is on leave, and, on top of this, to be frank, I’m a bit old-fashioned. Christmas alone in a strange town didn’t appeal to me. So you can see how I sprang at . . .’

‘Yes, I can see,’ she said. With the tongs, she replaced the cones that had fallen out of the fire ‘At Orvieto,’ she said, ‘the stoves were so satisfactory that one felt no ill effects from the tiled floors’

THE CHEERY SOUL

As I could think of nothing to add to this, I joined her in listening attentively to the hall clock. My entry into the drawing-room having been tentative, I had not made so bold as to close the door behind me, so a further coldness now seeped through from the hall. Except for the clock – whose loud tick was reluctant – there was not another sound to be heard; the very silence seemed to produce echoes. The Rangerton-Karneys' absence from their own house was becoming, virtually, ostentatious. 'I understand,' I said, 'that they are tremendously busy. Practically never not on the go.'

'They expect to have a finger in every pie'

Their aunt's ingratitude shocked me. She must be (as they had hinted) in a difficult state. They had always spoken with the most marked forbearance of her enforced return to them out of Italy. In England, they said, she had no other roof but theirs, and they were constantly wounded (their friends told me) by her saying she would have preferred internment in Italy.

In common with all my fellow-workers at ——, I had a high regard for the Rangerton-Karneys, an admiration tempered, perhaps, with awe. Their energy in the promotion of every war effort was only matched by the austerity of their personal lives. They appeared to have given up almost everything. That they never sat down could be seen from their drawing-room chairs. As 'local people' of the most solid kind they were on terms with the bigwigs of every department, the key minds of our small but now rather important town. Completely discreet, they were palpably 'in the know'.

Their house in the Midlands, in which I now so incredibly found myself, was largish, built of the local stone, *circa* 1860 I should say from its style. It was not

THE DEMON LOVER

very far from a railway junction, and at a still less distance from a canal I had evaded the strictures on Christmas travel by making the twelve-mile journey by bicycle – indeed, the suggestion that I should do this played a prominent part in their invitation So I bicycled over My little things for the two nights were contained in one of those useful American-cloth suitcases, strapped to my back-wheel carrier, while my parcel of rations could be slung, I found, from my handlebar The bumping of this parcel on my right knee as I pedalled was a major embarrassment To cap this, the misty damp of the afternoon had caused me to set off in a mackintosh At the best of times I am not an expert cyclist The grateful absence of hills (all this country is very flat) was cancelled out by the greasiness of the roads, and army traffic often made me dismount – it is always well to be on the safe side Now and then, cows or horses loomed up abruptly to peer at me over the reeking hedgerows The few anonymous villages I passed through all appeared, in the falling dusk, to be very much the same their inhabitants wore an air of war-time discretion, so I did not dare risk snubs by asking how far I had come My pocket map, however, proved less unhelpful when I found that I had been reading it upside down When, about half way, I turned on my lamp, I watched mist curdle under its wobbling ray My spectacles dimmed steadily, my hands numbed inside my knitted gloves (the only Christmas present I had received so far) and the mist condensed on my muffler in fine drops

I own that I had sustained myself through this journey on thoughts of the cheery welcome ahead The Rangerton-Karneys' invitation, delivered by word of mouth only three days ago, had been totally unexpected,

THE CHEERY SOUL

as well as gratifying I had had no reason to think they had taken notice of me We had met rarely, when I reported to the committees on which they sat That the brother and two sisters (so much alike that people took them for triplets) had attracted *my* wistful notice, I need not say But not only was my position a quite obscure one, I am not generally sought out, I make few new friends None of my colleagues had been to the Rangerton-Karneys' house there was an idea that they had given up guests As the news of their invitation to me spread (and I cannot say I did much to stop it spreading) I rose rapidly in everyone's estimation

In fact, their thought had been remarkably kind Can you wonder that I felt myself favoured? I was soon, now, to see their erstwhile committee faces wreathed with seasonable and genial smiles I never was one to doubt that people unbend at home Perhaps a little feverish from my cycling, I pictured blazing hearths through holly-garlanded doors

Owing to this indulgence in foolish fancy, my real arrival rather deflated me

'I suppose they went out after tea?' I said to the aunt
'After lunch, I think,' she replied 'There was no tea'
She picked up her book, which was about Mantegna, and went on reading, pitched rather tensely forward to catch the light of the dim-bulbed lamp I hesitated, then rose up saying that perhaps I had better deliver my rations to the cook 'If you can,' she said, turning over a page

The whurr of the clock preparing to strike seven made me jump The hall had funny acoustics – so much so that I strode across the wide breaches from rug to rug rather than hear my step on the stone flags Draught and dark coming down a shaft announced the presence of stairs

THE DEMON LOVER

I saw what little I saw by the flame of a night-light, palpitating under a blue glass inverted shade The hall and the staircase windows were not blacked out yet (Back in the drawing-room, I could only imagine, the aunt must have so far bestirred herself as to draw the curtains)

The kitchen was my objective – as I had said to the aunt I pushed at a promising baize door it immediately opened upon a vibration of heat and rich, heartening smells At these, the complexion of everything changed once more If my spirits, just lately, had not been very high, this was no doubt due to the fact that I had lunched on a sandwich, then had not dared leave my bicycle to look for a cup of tea I was in no mood to reproach the Rangerton-Karneys for this Christmas break in their well-known austere routine

But, in view of this, the kitchen was a surprise Warm, and spiced with excellent smells, it was in the dark completely but for the crimson glow from between the bars of the range A good deal puzzled, I switched the light on – the black-out, here, had been punctiliously done

The glare made me jump The cook must have found, for her own use, a quadruple-power electric bulb This now fairly blazed down on the vast scrubbed white wood table, scored and scarred by decades of the violent chopping of meat I looked about – to be staggered by what I did not see Neither on range, table, nor outsize dresser were there signs of the preparation of any meal Not a plate, not a spoon, not a canister showed any signs of action The heat-vibrating top of the range was bare, all the pots and pans were up above, clean and cold, in their places along the rack I went so far as to open

THE CHEERY SOUL

the oven door — a roasting smell came out, but there was nothing inside. A tap drip-drop-dripped on an upturned bowl in the sink — but nobody had been peeling potatoes there.

I put my rations down on the table and was, dumb-founded, preparing to turn away, when a white paper on the white wood caught my eye. This paper, in an inexpert line of block-printing, bore the somewhat unnecessary statement I AM NOT HERE. To this was added, in brackets 'Look in the fish kettle.' Though this be no affair of mine, could I fail to follow it up? Was this some new demonstration of haybox cookery, was I to find our dinner snugly concealed? I identified the fish kettle, a large tin object (about the size, I should say, of an infant's bath) that stood on a stool half-way between the sink and range. It wore a tight-fitting lid, which came off with a sort of plop; the sound in itself had an ominous hollowness. Inside, I found, again, only a piece of paper. This said 'Mr & the 2 Misses Rangerton-Karney can boil their heads. This holds 3.'

I felt that the least I could do for my hosts the Rangerton-Karneys was to suppress this unkind joke, so badly out of accord with the Christmas spirit. I could have dropped the paper straight into the kitchen fire, but on second thoughts I went back to consult the aunt. I found her so very deep in Mantegna as to be oblivious of the passage of time. She clearly did not like being interrupted. I said 'Can you tell me if your nephew and nieces had any kind of contretemps with their cook today?'

She replied 'I make a point of not asking questions.'

'Oh, so do I,' I replied, 'in the normal way. But I fear —'

'You fear what?'

THE DEMON LOVER

'She's gone,' I said 'Leaving this

The aunt looked at the paper, then said 'How curious' She added 'Of course, she has gone that happened a year ago She must have left several messages, I suppose I remember that Etta found one in the mincing machine, saying to tell them to mince their gizzards Etta seemed very much put out That was *last* Christmas Eve, I remember - dear me, what a coincidence So you found this, did you?' she said, re-reading the paper with less repugnance than I should have wished to see 'I expect, if you went on poking about the kitchen

Annoyed, I said tartly 'A reprehensible cook!'

'No worse than other English cooks,' she replied 'They all declare they have never heard of a *pasta*, and that oil in cookery makes one repeat But I always found her cheerful and kind And of course I miss her - Etta's been cooking since' (This was the elder Miss Rangerton-Karney)

'But look,' I said, 'I was led to *this* dreadful message, by another one, on the table *That* can't have been there a year'

'I suppose not,' the aunt said, showing indifference She picked up her book and inclined again to the lamp

I said 'You don't think some other servant'

She looked at me like a fish

'They *have* no other servants Oh no not since the cook'

Her voice trailed away 'Well, it's all very odd, I'm sure'

'It's worse than odd, my dear lady there won't be any dinner'

She shocked me by emitting a kind of giggle She said 'Unless they *do* boil their heads'

THE CHEERY SOUL

The idea that the Rangerton-Karneys might be out on a cook-hunt rationalized this perplexing evening for me I am always more comfortable when I can tell myself that people are, after all, behaving accountably The Rangerton-Karneys always acted in trio The idea that one of them should stay at home to receive me while the other two went ploughing round the dark country would, at this crisis, never present itself The Rangerton-Karneys' three sets of thoughts and feelings always appeared to join at the one root one might say that they had a composite character One thing, I could reflect, about misadventures is that they make for talk and often end in a laugh I tried in vain to picture the Rangerton-Karneys laughing – for that was a thing I had never seen

But if Etta is now resigned to doing the cooking
I thought better not to puzzle the thing out

Screening my electric torch with my fingers past the uncurtained windows, I went upstairs to look for what might be my room In my other hand I carried my little case – to tell the truth, I was anxious to change my socks. Embarking on a long passage, with doors ajar, I discreetly projected my torch into a number of rooms All were cold, some were palpably slept in, others dismantled. I located the resting-places of Etta, Max and Paulina by the odour of tar soap, shoe-leather and boiled woollen underclothes that announced their presences in so many committee rooms At an unintimate distance along the passage, the glint of my torch on Florentine bric-à-brac suggested the headquarters of the aunt I did at last succeed, by elimination, in finding the spare room prepared for me They had put me just across the way from their aunt My torch and my touch revealed a made-up

THE DEMON LOVER

bed, draped in a glacial white starched quilt, two fringed towels straddling the water-jug, and virgin white mats to receive my brushes and comb I successively bumped my knee (the knee still sore from the parcel) on two upright chairs Yes, this must be the room for me Oddly enough, it was much less cold than the others – but I did not think of that at the time Having done what was necessary to the window, I lit up, to consider my new domain

Somebody had been lying on my bed When I rest during the day, I always remove the quilt, but whoever it was had neglected to do this A deep trough, with a map of creases, appeared The creases, however, did not extend far Whoever it was had lain here in a contented stupor

I worried – Etta might blame me To distract my thoughts, I opened my little case and went to put my things on the dressing-table The mirror was tilted upwards under the light, and something was written on it in soap DEARIE, DON'T MIND ME I at once went to the washstand, where the soap could be verified – it was a used cake, one corner blunted by writing On my way back, I kicked over a black bottle, which, so placed on the floor as to be in easy reach from the bed, now gaily and noisily bowled away It was empty – I had to admit that its contents, breathed out again, gave that decided character to my room

The aunt was to be heard, patteing up the stairs Was this belated hostess-ship on her part? She came into view of my door, carrying the night-light from the hall table Giving me a modest, affronted look she said 'I thought I'd tidy my hair'

'The cook has been lying on my bed'

THE CHEERY SOUL

'That would have been very possible, I'm afraid. She was often a little – if you know what I mean. But, she left last Christmas.'

'She's written something.'

'I don't see what one can do,' the aunt said, turning into her room. For my part, I dipped a towel into the jug and reluctantly tried to rub out the cook's message, but this only left a blur all over the glass. I applied to this the drier end of the towel. Oddly enough (perhaps) I felt fortified this occult good feeling was, somehow, warming. The cook was supplying that touch of nature I had missed since crossing the Rangerton-Karneys' threshold. Thus, when I stepped back for another look at the mirror, I was barely surprised to find that a sprig of mistletoe had been twisted around the cord of the hanging electric light.

My disreputable psychic pleasure was to be interrupted. Downstairs, in the caves of the house, the front door bell jangled, then jangled again. This was followed by an interlude with the knocker an imperious rat-a-tat-tat. I called across to the aunt 'Ought one of us to go down? It might be a telegram.'

'I don't think so – why?'

We heard the glass door of the porch (the door through which I had made my so different entry) being rattled open, we heard the hall traversed by footsteps with the weight of authority. In response to a mighty '*Anyone there?*' I defied the aunt's judgment and went hurrying down. Coming on a policeman outlined in the drawing-room door; my first thought was that this must be about the black-out. I edged in, silent, just behind the policeman he looked about him suspiciously, then saw me. 'And who might you be?' he said. The bring-

THE DEMON LOVER

ing out of his notebook gave me stage fright during my first and other replies I explained that the Rangerton-Karneys had asked me to come and stay

'Oh, they did?' he said 'Well, that is a laugh Seen much of them?'

'Not so far '

'Well, you won't' I asked why he ignored my question, asked for all my particulars, quizzed my identity card 'I shall check up on all this,' he said heavily 'So they asked you for Christmas, did they? And just *when*, may I ask, was this invitation issued?'

'Well, er - three days ago '

This made me quite popular He said 'Much as I thought Attempt to cover their tracks and divert suspicion I daresay you blew off all round about them having asked you here?'

'I may have mentioned it to one or two friends '

He looked pleased again and said 'Just what they reckoned on Not a soul was to guess they had planned to bolt As for you - *you're* a cool hand, I must say Just walked in, found the place empty and dossed down Never once strike you there was anything fishy?'

'A good deal struck me,' I replied austerely 'I took it however, that my host and his sisters had been unexpectedly called out - perhaps to look for a cook '

'Ah, cook,' he said 'Now what brought that to your mind?'

'Her whereabouts seemed uncertain, if you know what I mean '

Whereupon, he whipped over several leaves of his notebook 'The last cook employed here,' he said, 'was in residence here four days, departing last Christmas Eve, December 24th, 194- We have evidence that she

THE CHEERY SOUL

stated locally that she was unable to tolerate certain goings-on. She specified interference in her department, undue advantage taken of the rationing system, mental cruelty to an elderly female refugee.

I interposed 'That would certainly be the aunt'

'...and failure to observe Christmas in the appropriate manner. On this last point she expressed herself violently. She further adduced (though with less violence of feeling) that her three employers were "dirty spies with their noses in everything". Subsequently, she withdrew this last remark, her words were, "I do not wish to make trouble, as I know how to make trouble in a way of my own". However, certain remarks she had let drop have been since followed up, and proved useful in our inquiries. Unhappily, we cannot check up on them, as the deceased met her end shortly after leaving this house.'

'The *deceased*?' I cried, with a sinking heart

'Proceeding through the hall door and down the approach or avenue, in an almost total state of intoxication, she was heard singing "God rest you merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay". She also shouted "Me for an English Christmas!" Accosting several pedestrians, she informed them that in her opinion times were not what they were. She spoke with emotion (being intoxicated) of turkey, mince pies, ham, plum pudding, etc. She was last seen hurrying in the direction of the canal, saying she must get brandy to make her sauce. She was last heard in the vicinity of the canal. The body was recovered from the canal on Boxing Day, December 26th, 194—'

'But what,' I said, 'has happened to the Rangerton-Karneys?'

'Now, now' said the policeman, shaking his finger

THE DEMON LOVER

sternly ‘You *may* hear as much as is good for you, one day – or you may not. Did you ever hear of the Safety of the Realm? I don’t mind telling you one thing – you’re lucky. You might have landed yourself in a nasty mess.’

‘But, good heavens – the *Rangerton-Karneys!* They know everyone’

‘Ah!’ he said, ‘but it’s that kind you have to watch.’ Heavy with this reflection, his eye travelled over the hearth-rug. He stooped with a creak and picked up the aunt’s book. ‘Wop name,’ he said, ‘propaganda sticks out a mile. Now, don’t you cut off anywhere, while I am now proceeding to search the house.’

‘Cut off?’ I nearly said, ‘What do you take me for?’ Alone, I sat down in the aunt’s chair and dropped a few more fir cones into the extinct fire.

* .

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

* .

‘W^HAT’S the matter,’ he asked, ‘have I said something?’

Not troubling to get him quite into focus, she turned her head and said, ‘No, why – did you say anything?’

‘Or p’r’aps you don’t like this place?’

‘I don’t mind it – why?’ she said, looking round the night club, which was not quite as dark as a church, as though for the first time. At some tables you had to look twice, to see who was there, what lights there were were dissolved in a haze of smoke, the walls were rather vaultlike, with no mirrors, on the floor dancers drifted like pairs of vertical fish. He, meanwhile, studied her from across their table with neither anxiety nor acute interest, but with a dreamlike caricature of both. Then he raised the bottle between them and said, ‘Mm-mm?’ to which she replied by placing the flat of her hand mutely, mulishly, across the top of her glass. Not annoyed, he shrugged, filled up his own and continued, ‘Then anything isn’t really the matter, then?’

‘This tune, this song, is the matter’

‘Oh – shall we dance?’

‘No.’ Behind her agelessly gurlish face, sleekly framed by the cut of her fawn-blonde hair, there passed a wave of genuine trouble for which her features had no vocabulary. ‘It’s what they’re playing – this tune’

T H E D E M O N L O V E R

‘It’s pre-war,’ he said knowledgeably

‘It’s last war’

‘Well, last war’s pre-war’

‘It’s the tune my father remembered he used to dance to, it’s the tune I remember him always trying to sing’

‘Why, is your father dead?’

‘No, I don’t suppose so, why?’

‘Sorry,’ he said quickly, ‘I mean, if

‘Sorry, why are you sorry?’ she said, raising her eyebrows ‘Didn’t I ever tell you about my father? I always thought he made me rather a bore Wasn’t it you I was telling about my father?’

‘No I suppose it must have been someone else One meets so many people’

‘Oh, what,’ she said, ‘have I hurt your feelings? But you haven’t got any feelings about me’

‘Only because you haven’t got any feelings about me’

‘Haven’t I?’ she said, as though really wanting to know
‘Still, it hasn’t seemed all the time as though we were quite a flop’

‘Look,’ he said, ‘don’t be awkward Tell me about your father’

‘He was twenty-six’

‘When?’

‘How do you mean, “when”? Twenty-six was my father’s age He was tall and lean and leggy, with a casual sort of way of swinging himself about He was fair, and the shape of his face was a rather long narrow square Sometimes his eyes faded in until you could hardly see them, sometimes he seemed to be wearing a blank mask You really only quite got the plan of his face when it was turned halfway between a light and a shadow – *then* his eyebrows and eyehollows, the dints

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

just over his nostrils, the cut of his upper lip and the cleft in his chin, and the broken in-and-out outline down from his temple past his cheekbone into his jaw all came out at you, like a message you had to read in a single flash'

She paused and lighted a cigarette He said, 'You sound as though you had never got used to him'

She went on, 'My father was one of the young men who were not killed in the last war He was a man in the last war until that stopped, then I don't quite know what he was, and I don't think he ever quite knew either He got his commission and first went out to France about 1915, I think he said When he got leaves he got back to London and had good times, by which I mean something larky but quite romantic, in the course of one of which, I don't know which one, he fell in love with my mother and they used to go dancing, and got engaged in that leave and got married the next My mother was a flapper, if you knew about flappers? They were the pin-ups *de ses jours*, and at the same time inspired idealistic feeling My mother was dark and fluffy and as slim as a wraith, a great *glacé* ribbon bow tied her hair back and stood out like a calyx behind her face, and her hair itself hung down in a plume so long that it tickled my father's hand while he held her while they were dancing and while she sometimes swam up at him with her violet eyes Each time he had to go back to the front again she was miserable, and had to put her hair up, because her relations said it was high time But sometimes when he got back again on leave she returned to being a flapper again, to please him Between his leaves she had to go back to live with her mother and sisters in West Kensington, and her sisters had a whole

THE DEMON LOVER

pack of business friends who had somehow never had to go near the front, and all these combined in an effort to cheer her up, but, as she always wrote to my father, nothing did any good I suppose everyone felt it was for the best when they knew there was going to be the patter of little feet I wasn't actually *born* till the summer of 1918 If you remember, I told you my age last night

'The first thing *I* remember, upon becoming conscious, was living in one of those bungalows on the flats near Staines The river must have been somewhere, but I don't think I saw it The only point about that region is that it has no point and that it goes on and on I think there are floods there sometimes, there would be nothing to stop them, a forest fire would be what is needed really, but that would not be possible as there are no trees It would have looked better, really, just left as primeval marsh, but someone had once said, "Let there be bungalows" If you ever motored anywhere near it you probably asked yourself who lives there, and why Well, my father and mother and I did, and why? – because it was cheap, and there was no one to criticize how you were getting on Our bungalow was tucked well away in the middle, got at by a sort of maze of in those days unmade roads I'm glad to say I've forgotten which one it was Most of our neighbours kept themselves to themselves for, probably, like ours, the best reasons, but most of them kept hens also, we didn't even do that All round us, nature ran riot between corrugated iron, clothes-lines and creosoted lean-to sheds

'I know that our bungalow had been taken furnished, the only things we seemed to have of our own were a number of satin cushions with satin fruits stitched on

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

In order to dislodge my biscuit crumbs from the satin apples my mother used to shake the cushions out of the window on to the lawn Except for the prettiness of the dandelions, our lawn got to look and feel rather like a hearthrug, I mean, it got covered with threads and cinders and shreds, once when I was crawling on it I got a pin in my hand, another time I got sharp glass beads in my knee The next-door hens used to slip through and pick about, never, apparently, quite in vain At the far end, some Dorothy Perkins roses tried to climb up a pergola that was always falling down I remember my father reaching up in his shirt-sleeves, trying to nail it up Another thing he had to do in our home was apply the whole of his strength to the doors, french window and windows, which warped until they would not open nor shut I used to come up behind him and push too

'The war by now, of course, had been over for some years, my father was out of the British Army and was what was called taking his time and looking around For how long he had been doing so I can't exactly tell you He not only read all the "post vacant" advertisements every day but composed and succeeded in getting printed an advertisement of himself, which he read aloud to me it said he was prepared to go anywhere and try anything I said, "But what's an ex-officer?", and he said, "I am" Our dining-room table, which was for some reason, possibly me, sticky, was always spread with new newspapers he had just brought home, and he used to be leaning over them on his elbows, biting harder and harder on the stem of his pipe I don't think I discovered for some years later that the principal reason for newspapers is news My father never looked at them for

THE DEMON LOVER

that reason — just as he always lost interest in any book in which he had lost his place. Or perhaps he was not in the mood for world events. My mother had never cared much for them at the best of times. “To think of all we expected after the war,” she used to say to my father, from day to day.

‘My mother, by this time, had had her hair shingled — in fact, I never remember her any other way than with a dark shaved point tapered down the back of her neck. I don’t know when she’d begun to be jealous of him and me. Every time he came back from an interview that he hadn’t got to or from an interview that hadn’t come to anything, he used to bring me back something, to cheer himself up, and the wheels off all the mechanical toys got mixed with the beads and the threads and the cinders into our lawn. What my mother was really most afraid of was that my father would bundle us all off into the great open spaces, in order to start fresh somewhere and grow something. I imagine he knew several chaps who had, or were going to. After one or two starts on the subject he shut up, but I could see she could see he was nursing it. It frustrated her from nagging at him all out about not succeeding in getting a job in England; she was anxious not to provide an opening for him to say, “Well, there’s always one thing we *could* do . . .” The hard glassy look her eyes got made them look like doll’s eyes, which may partly have been what kept me from liking dolls. So they practically never talked about anything. I don’t think she even knew he minded about her hair.

‘You may be going to ask when my father sang. He often began to sing — when he hammered away at the pergola, when something he thought of suddenly struck

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

him as good, when the heave he gave at the warped french window sent it flying open into the garden He was constantly starting to sing, but he never got very far - you see, he had no place where he could sing unheard The walls were thin and the lawn was tiny and the air round the bungalow was so silent and heavy that my mother was forced to listen to every note The lordly way my father would burst out singing, like the lordly way he cocked his hat over one eye, had come to annoy her, in view of everything else But the still more unfortunate thing was that my father only knew, or else only liked, two tunes, which were two tunes out of the bygone years which made him think of the war and being in love Yes, they were dance tunes, yes, we have just heard one, yes, they also reminded my mother of war and love So when he had got to the fourth or fifth bar of either, she would call out to know if he wanted to drive her mad He would stop and say, "Sorry", but if he was in the mood he'd be well away, the next minute, with the alternative tune, and she would be put to the trouble of stopping that

'Mother did not know what to look like now she was not a flapper Mostly she looked like nothing - I wonder whether she knew Perhaps that was what she saw in the satin cushions they looked like something - at least, to her The day she and I so suddenly went to London to call on her sister's friend she did certainly manage, however, to look like something My father, watching us down the garden path, ventured no comment on her or my appearance However, which ought to have cheered me up, we created quite a furore in the train We went sailing into the richly-appointed office of mother's sister's friend, who was one of those

THE DEMON LOVER

who, during the war, had felt mother should be cheered up Can I, need I, describe him? The usual kind of business pudge, in a suit He looked in a reluctant way at my mother, and reluctantly, slightly morbidly, at me I don't know how I got the impression mother held all the cards The conversation, of course, flowed over my head – I just cruised round and round the room, knocking objects over But the outcome – as I gathered when we got home – was that mother's sister's friend said he'd give my father a job He had said he could use an ex-officer, provided it was an ex-officer with charm What my father would have to do was to interest housewives, not in himself but in vacuum cleaners If it helped to interest some housewives in vacuum cleaners, he could interest them just a little bit in himself Mother's sister's friend called this, using judgment of character

'When my mother, that evening, put all this to my father, he did not say anything but simply stood and stared *She* said, "Then I suppose you want us to starve?"'

'So my father stopped being a problem and became a travelling salesman The best part was that the firm allowed him a car

'I must say for my mother that she did not ask my father how he was getting on At least she had much less trouble about the singing sometimes he'd be away for two or three days together, when he was home he simply sprawled in his chair, now and then asking when there'd be something to eat, as unmusical as a gramophone with the spring broken When I came filtering in he sometimes opened one eye and said, "And what have *you* been doing?"' – as though he'd just finished telling me what he'd been doing himself He garaged the car

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

some way down the next road, and in the mornings when he was starting off I used to walk with him to the garage. He used to get into the car, start up the engine, back out, then look round at me and say, "Like to come out on the job?" - yes, I bet you would", then let the clutch in and whizz off. Something about this always made me feel sick.

'I don't of course clearly remember when this began, or how long it went on for, but I know when it stopped. The night before my seventh birthday was a June night, because my birthdays are in June. The people who lived all round us were sitting out, on the verandas or on their lawns, but my mother had sent me to bed early because she was having a party for me next day and did not want to get me over-excited. My birthday cake which had arrived from the shop was on the dining-room sideboard, with a teacloth over it to keep the flies off, and my father and mother were in the lounge with the french window shut, because she had several things to say to him that she did not want the people all round to hear. The heat travelled through the roof into all the rooms, so that I could not sleep also, my bed was against the wall of my room, and the lounge was the other side of the wall. My mother went on like someone who has been saving up - just some touch, I suppose, had been needed to set her off. She said she would like to know why there was not more money - my father's job, I suppose now, was on a commission basis. Or, she said, was he keeping another woman? - a thing she had heard that most travelling salesmen did. She said she really felt quite ashamed of having foisted my father on to her sister's friend, and that she only wondered how long the firm would stand for it. She said her sisters

THE DEMON LOVER

pitied her, though she had tried to conceal from them that her² life was hell My father, who had as usual got home late and as usual had not yet had any supper, could not be heard saying anything My mother then said she wished she knew why she had married him, and would like still more to know why he had married her

‘My father said, “You were so lovely – you’ve no idea ”

‘Next morning there was a heat-haze over everything I hustled into the dining-room to see if there was anything on my plate I forgot what my mother had given me, but her richest sister had sent me a manicure-set in a purple box all the objects had purple handles and lay in grooves on white velvet While I was taking them out and putting them back again, my father suddenly looked up from his coffee and said *his* present for me was in the car, and that I’d have to come out and fetch it My mother could hardly say no to this, though of course I saw her opening her mouth So out we set, I gripping the manicure-set I don’t think my father seemed odder than usual, though he was on the point of doing an unexpected thing – when he had got the car started and backed out he suddenly held open the other door and said, “Come on, nipp in, look sharp, my present to you is a day trip ” So then I nipped in and we drove off, as though this were the most natural thing in the world.

‘The car was a two-seater, with a let-down hood No, of course I cannot remember what make it was That morning, the hood was down Locked up in the dickie behind my father kept the specimen vacuum cleaner he interested women in He drove fast, and as we hit the bumps in the road I heard the parts of the cleaner clunking about As we drove, the sun began to burn its way through the haze, making the roses in some

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

of the grander gardens look almost impossibly large and bright My bare knees began to grill on the leather cushion, and the crumples eased out of the front of my cotton frock

'I had never been with my father when he was driving a car - it felt as though speed and power were streaming out of him, and as if he and I were devouring everything that we passed I sat slumped round with my cheek against the hot cushion and sometimes stared at his profile, sometimes stared at his wrists, till he squinted round and said, "Anything wrong with *me*?" Later on, he added, "Why not look at the scenery?" By that time there *was* some scenery, if that means grass and trees, in fact, these had been going on for some time, in a green band streaming behind my father's face When I said, "Where are we going?" he said, "Well, where *are* we going?" At that point I saw quite a large hill, in fact a whole party of them, lapping into each other as though they would never stop, and never having seen anything of the kind before I could not help saying, "Oh, I say, look!"'

'My father gave a nod, without stopping singing - I told you he had begun to sing? He had not only started but gone on when he came to the end of his first tune he said, "Pom-pom", like a drum, then started through it again, after that he worked around to the second, which he sang two or three times, with me joining in We both liked the second still better, and how right we were - and it's worn well, hasn't it? That's what this band's just played'

'Oh, what they've just played?' he said, and looked narrowly at the band, while, reaching round for the bottle on the table between them he lifted it to replenish

THE DEMON LOVER

her glass and his This time she did not see or did not bother to stop him she looked at her full glass vaguely, then vaguely drank After a minute she went on

‘Ginger beer, sausage rolls, chocolate – that was what we bought when we stopped at the village shop Also my father bought a blue comb off a card of combs, with which he attempted to do my hair, which had blown into tags and ratstails over my eyes and face He looked at me while he combed in a puzzled way, as though something about me that hadn’t struck him became a problem to him for the first time I said, “Aren’t we going to sell any vacuum cleaners?”’ and he said, “We’ll try and interest the Berkshire Downs” I thought that meant, meet a family, but all we did was turn out of the village and start up a rough track, to where there could not be any people at all The car climbed with a slow but exciting roar from the heat of the engine and the heat of the sun the chocolate in the paper bag in my hands was melting by the time we came to the top

‘From the top, where we lay on our stomachs in the shade of the car, we could see – oh well, can’t you imagine, can’t you? It was an outsize June day The country below us looked all colours, and was washed over in the most reckless way with light, going on and on into the distance the clumps of trees and the roofs of villages and the church towers had quivering glimmers round them, but most of all there was space, sort of moulded space, and the blue of earth ran into the blue of sky

‘My father’s face was turned away from me, propped up on his hand I finally said to him, “What’s that?”’

‘“What’s what?”’ he said, startled

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

“ “What we’re looking at ” ”

“ “England,” he said, “that’s England I thought I’d like to see her again ” ”

“ “But don’t we live in England?” ”

“ He took no notice “How I loved her,” he said.

“ “Oh, but don’t you now?” ”

“ “I’ve lost her,” he said, “or she’s lost me, I don’t quite know which, I don’t understand what’s happened ” ”
He rolled round and looked at me and said, “But *you* like it, don’t you? I thought I’d like you to see, if just once, what I once saw ” ”

“ I was well into the third of my sausage rolls my mouth was full, I could only stare at my father. He said, “And there’s something else down there – see it?” ” I screwed my eyes up but still only saw the distance
“Peace,” he said “Look hard at it, don’t forget it ” ”

“ “What’s peace?” ” I said

“ “An idea you have when there’s a war on, to make you fight well An idea that gets lost when there isn’t a war ” ”

“ I licked pastry-crumbs off my chin and began on chocolate By this time my father lay on his back, with his fingers thatched together over his eyes he talked, but more to the sky than me None of the things he was saying now went anywhere near my brain – a child’s brain, how could they? – his actual words are gone as though I had never heard them, but his meaning lodged itself in some part of my inside and is still there and has grown up with me He talked about war and how he had once felt, and about leaves and love and dancing and going back to the war, then the birth of me – “Seven years ago today,” he said, “seven years, I remember how they brought me the telegram ” ”

THE DEMON LOVER

'Something else, on top of the sausage and heat and chocolate suddenly made me feel sick and begin to cry "Oh please, oh please don't," I said, "it's my birthday"

"Don't what?" he said I, naturally, didn't know My father again looked at me, with the same expression he had worn when attempting to comb my hair Something about me — my age? — was a proposition Then he shut his eyes, like — I saw later, not at the time — somebody finally banishing an idea "No, it wouldn't work," he said "It simply couldn't be done You can wait for me if you want I can't wait for you"

'Then he began acting like somebody very sleepy he yawned and yawned at me till I yawned at him I didn't feel sick any more, but the heat of the afternoon came down like a grey-blue blanket over my head "What you and I want," my father said, watching me, "is a good sleep"

'I wish I could tell you at *which* moment I fell asleep, and stopped blurrily looking at him between my eyelids, because *that* was the moment when I last saw my father

'When I woke, there was no more shadow on my side of the car, the light had changed and everything looked bright yellow I called to my father but he did not answer, for the adequate reason that he was not there He was gone For some reason I wasn't at all frightened, I thought he must have gone to look for something for us for tea I remembered that I was not at my birthday party, and I must say I thought twice about that pink cake I was more bored than anything, till I remembered my manicure-set, which owing to the funniness of the day I had not been able to open a second time I took the objects out of their velvet bedding and began to prod at my nails, as I'd seen my mother do Then I

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

got up and walked, once more, all the way round the car It was then that I noticed what I had missed before a piece of white paper twisted into the radiator I couldn't read handwriting very well, but did at last make out what my father had put "*The car and the vacuum cleaner are the property of Messrs X and X*" (the firm of my mother's sister's friend), "*the child is the property of Mrs So-and-So, of Such-and-such*" (I needn't bother to give you my mother's name and the name of our bungalow), "*the manicure-set, the comb and anything still left in the paper bags are the property of the child Signed ——*" It was signed with my father's name

'The two dots I saw starting zigzag up the side of the down turned out to be two sweating policemen What happened when they came to where I was was interesting at the moment but is not interesting now They checked up on the message on the front of the car, then told me my father had telephoned to the police station, and that I was to be a good girl and come with them When they had checked up on the cleaner, we all drove down I remember the constable's knobbly, sticky red hands looked queer on the wheel where my father's had lately been At the police station, someone or other's wife made quite a fuss about me and gave me tea, then we piled into another car and drove on again I was soon dead asleep, and I only woke when we stopped in the dark at the gate of the bungalow

'Having tottered down the path, in the light from the front door, my mother clawed me out of the car, sobbing I noticed her breath smelt unusual We and the policeman then trooped into the lounge, where the policeman kept nodding and jotting things on a pad To cheer up

T H E D E M O N L O V E R

my mother he said that England was very small - "And he's not, so far as you know, in possession of a passport?" I sucked blobs of chocolate off the front of my frock while my mother described my father to the policeman "But no doubt," the policeman said, "he'll be thinking better of this A man's home is a man's home, I always say "

"When my mother and I were left alone in the lounge, we stared at each other in the electric light While she asked if I knew how unnatural my father was, she kept pouring out a little more from the bottle she said she had to have medicine to settle her nerves, but it seemed to act on her nerves just the opposite way That I wouldn't say what my father had said and done set her off fairly raving against my father To put it mildly, she lost all kind of control She finished up with "And such a fool, too - a fool, a fool!"

"He is not a fool," I said, "he's my father"

"He is not your father," she screamed, "and he is a fool"

"That made me stare at her, and her stare at me

"How do you mean," I said, "my father is not my father?"

'My mother's reaction to this was exactly like as if someone had suddenly pitched a pail of cold water over her She pulled herself up and something jumped in her eyes She said she had not said anything of the sort, and that if I ever said she had I was a wicked girl I said I hadn't said she had, but she had said so She put on a worried look and put a hand on my forehead and said she could feel I'd got a touch of the sun A touch of the sun, she said, would make me imagine things - and no wonder, after the day I'd had

'All next day I was kept in bed, not as a punishment

SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME

but as a kind of treat My mother was ever so nice to me, she kept coming in to put a hand on my forehead The one thing she did not do was get the doctor And afterwards, when I was let get up, nothing was good enough for me, until really anyone would have thought that my mother felt she was in my power Shortly after, her rich sister came down, and my mother then had a fine time, crying, talking and crying, the sister then took us back with her to London, where my mother talked and cried even more Of course I asked my aunt about what my mother had said, but my aunt said that if I imagined such wicked things they would have to think there was something wrong with my brain So I did not re-open the subject, and am not doing so now In the course of time my mother succeeded in divorcing my father for desertion, she was unable to marry her sister's friend because he was married and apparently always had been, but she did marry a friend of her sister's friend's, and was soon respectably settled in Bermuda, where as far as I know she still is '

'But your father?' he said

'Well, what about my father?'

'You don't mean you never heard anything more of him?'

'I never said so - he sent me two picture postcards The last' - she counted back 'arrived fourteen years ago But there probably have been others that went astray The way I've always lived, I'm not long at any address '

He essayed, rashly, 'Been a bit of a waif?'

The look he got back for this was halfway between glass and ice 'A waif's the first thing I learned not to be No, more likely my father decided, better leave it at

THE DEMON LOVER

that People don't, on the whole, come back, and I've never blamed them No, why should he be dead? Why should not he be – any place?"

"Here, for instance?"

"Tonight, you mean?"

"Why not?" he said "Why not – as you say?"

"Here" She looked round the tables, as though she hardly knew where she was herself She looked round the tables, over which smoke thickened, round which khaki melted into the khaki gloom Then her eyes returned, to fix, with unsparing attention, an addled trio of men round the fifty-five mark "Here" she repeated, "my father? – I hope not'

"But I thought," he said, watching her watching the old buffers, "I thought we were looking for someone of twenty-six?"

"Give me a cigarette," she said, "and, also, don't be cruel"

"I wouldn't be," he said, as he lighted the cigarette, "if you had any feeling for me '

THE DEMON LOVER

TOWARDS the end of her day in London Mrs Drover went round to her shut-up house to look for several things she wanted to take away. Some belonged to herself, some to her family, who were by now used to their country life. It was late August, it had been a steamy, showery day at the moment the trees down the pavement glittered in an escape of humid yellow afternoon sun. Against the next batch of clouds, already piling up ink-dark, broken chimneys and parapets stood out. In her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queerness had silted up, a cat wove itself in and out of railings, but no human eye watched Mrs Drover's return. Shifting some parcels under her arm, she slowly forced round her latchkey in an unwilling lock, then gave the door, which had warped, a push with her knee. Dead air came out to meet her as she went in.

The staircase window having been boarded up, no light came down into the hall. But one door, she could just see, stood ajar, so she went quickly through into the room and unshuttered the big window in there. Now the prosaic woman, looking about her, was more perplexed than she knew by everything that she saw, by traces of her long former habit of life — the yellow smoke-stain up the white marble mantelpiece, the ring left by a vase on the top of the escritoire, the bruise in

THE DEMON LOVER

the wallpaper where, on the door being thrown open widely, the china handle had always hit the wall. The piano, having gone away to be stored, had left what looked like claw-marks on its part of the parquet. Though not much dust had seeped in, each object wore a film of another kind, and, the only ventilation being the chimney, the whole drawing-room smelled of the cold hearth. Mrs Drover put down her parcels on the escritoire and left the room to proceed upstairs, the things she wanted were in a bedroom chest.

She had been anxious to see how the house was – the part-time caretaker she shared with some neighbours was away this week on his holiday, known to be not yet back. At the best of times he did not look in often, and she was never sure that she trusted him. There were some cracks in the structure, left by the last bombing, on which she was anxious to keep an eye. Not that one could do anything –

A shaft of refracted daylight now lay across the hall. She stopped dead and stared at the hall table – on this lay a letter addressed to her.

She thought first – then the caretaker *must* be back. All the same, who, seeing the house shuttered, would have dropped a letter in at the box? It was not a circular, it was not a bill. And the post office redirected, to the address in the country, everything for her that came through the post. The caretaker (even if he *were* back) did not know she was due in London today – her call here had been planned to be a surprise – so his negligence in the manner of this letter, leaving it to wait in the dusk and the dust, annoyed her. Annoyed, she picked up the letter, which bore no stamp. But it cannot be important, or they would know. She took

THE DEMON LOVER

the letter rapidly upstairs with her, without a stop to look at the writing till she reached what had been her bedroom, where she let in light The room looked over the garden and other gardens the sun had gone in, as the clouds sharpened and lowered, the trees and rank lawns seemed already to smoke with dark Her reluctance to look again at the letter came from the fact that she felt intruded upon — and by someone contemptuous of her ways However, in the tenseness preceding the fall of rain she read it it was a few lines

Dear Kathleen You will not have forgotten that today is our anniversary, and the day we said The years have gone by at once slowly and fast In view of the fact that nothing has changed, I shall rely upon you to keep your promise I was sorry to see you leave London, but was satisfied that you would be back in time You may expect me, therefore, at the hour arranged Until then K

Mrs Drover looked for the date it was today's She dropped the letter on to the bed-springs, then picked it up to see the writing again — her lips, beneath the remains of lipstick, beginning to go white She felt so much the change in her own face that she went to the mirror, polished a clear patch in it and looked at once urgently and stealthily in She was confronted by a woman of forty-four, with eyes starting out under a hat-brim that had been rather carelessly pulled down She had not put on any more powder since she left the shop where she ate her solitary tea The pearls her husband had given her on their marriage hung loose round her now rather thinner throat, slipping in the V of the pink wool jumper her sister knitted last autumn as they sat round

THE DEMON LOVER

the fire Mrs Drover's most normal expression was one of controlled worry, but of assent Since the birth of the third of her little boys, attended by a quite serious illness, she had had an intermittent muscular flicker to the left of her mouth, but in spite of this she could always sustain a manner that was at once energetic and calm

Turning from her own face as precipitately as she had gone to meet it, she went to the chest where the things were, unlocked it, threw up the lid and knelt to search But as rain began to come crashing down she could not keep from looking over her shoulder at the stripped bed on which the letter lay Behind the blanket of rain the clock of the church that still stood struck six - with rapidly heightening apprehension she counted each of the slow strokes 'The hour arranged My God,' she said, '*what* hour? How should I ? After twenty-five years

The young girl talking to the soldier in the garden had not ever completely seen his face It was dark, they were saying goodbye under a tree Now and then - for it felt, from not seeing him at this intense moment, as though she had never seen him at all - she verified his presence for these few moments longer by putting out a hand, which he each time pressed, without very much kindness, and painfully, on to one of the breast buttons of his uniform That cut of the button on the palm of her hand was, principally what she was to carry away This was so near the end of a leave from France that she could only wish him already gone It was August 1916 Being not kissed, being drawn away from and looked at intimidated Kathleen till she imagined spectral glitters in the place of his eyes Turning away and

THE DEMON LOVER

looking back up the lawn she saw, through branches of trees, the drawing-room window alight she caught a breath for the moment when she could go running back there into the safe arms of her mother and sister, and cry 'What shall I do, what shall I do? He has gone'

Hearing her catch her breath, her fiancé said, without feeling 'Cold?'

'You're going away such a long way'

'Not so far as you think',

'I don't understand?'

'You don't have to,' he said 'You will You know what we said'

'But that was — suppose you — I mean, suppose'

'I shall be with you,' he said, 'sooner or later You won't forget that You need do nothing but wait'

Only a little more than a minute later she was free to run up the silent lawn Looking in through the window at her mother and sister, who did not for the moment perceive her, she already felt that unnatural promise drive down between her and the rest of all human kind No other way of having given herself could have made her feel so apart, lost and foresworn She could not have plighted a more sinister troth

Kathleen behaved well when, some months later, her fiancé was reported missing, presumed killed Her family not only supported her but were able to praise her courage without stint because they could not regret, as a husband for her, the man they knew almost nothing about They hoped she would, in a year or two, console herself — and had it been only a question of consolation things might have gone much straighter ahead But her trouble, behind just a little grief, was a complete dislocation from everything She did not reject other

THE DEMON LOVER

lovers, for these failed to appear for years she failed to attract men – and with the approach of her 'thirties she became natural enough to share her family's anxiousness on this score She began to put herself out, to wonder, and at thirty-two she was very greatly relieved to find herself being courted by William Drover She married him, and the two of them settled down in this quiet, arboreal part of Kensington in this house the years piled up, her children were born and they all lived till they were driven out by the bombs of the next war Her movements as Mrs Drover were circumscribed, and she dismissed any idea that they were still watched

As things were – dead or living the letter-writer sent her only a threat Unable, for some minutes, to go on kneeling with her back exposed to the empty room, Mrs Drover rose from the chest to sit on an upright chair whose back was firmly against the wall The desuetude of her former bedroom, her married London home's whole air of being a cracked cup from which memory, with its reassuring power, had either evaporated or leaked away, made a crisis – and at just this crisis the letter-writer had, knowledgeably, struck The hollowness of the house this evening cancelled years on years of voices, habits and steps Through the shut windows she only heard rain fall on the roofs around To rally herself, she said she was in a mood – and, for two or three seconds shutting her eyes, told herself that she had imagined the letter But she opened them – there it lay on the bed

On the supernatural side of the letter's entrance she was not permitting her mind to dwell Who, in London, knew she meant to call at the house today? Evidently, however, this had been known The caretaker, *had* he come back, had had no cause to expect her he would

THE DEMON LOVER

have taken the letter in his pocket, to forward it, at his own time, through the post. There was no other sign that the caretaker had been in – but, if not? Letters dropped in at doors of deserted houses do not fly or walk to tables in halls. They do not sit on the dust of empty tables with the air of certainty that they will be found. There is needed some human hand – but nobody but the caretaker had a key. Under circumstances she did not care to consider, a house can be entered without a key. It was possible that she was not alone now. She might be being waited for, downstairs. Waited for – until when? Until ‘the hour arranged’. At least that was not six o’clock six has struck.

She rose from the chair and went over and locked the door.

The thing was, to get out. To fly? No, not that she had to catch her train. As a woman whose utter dependability was the keystone of her family life she was not willing to return to the country, to her husband, her little boys and her sister, without the objects she had come up to fetch. Resuming work at the chest she set about making up a number of parcels in a rapid, fumbling-decisive way. These, with her shopping parcels, would be too much to carry, these meant a taxi – at the thought of the taxi her heart went up and her normal breathing resumed. I will ring up the taxi now, the taxi cannot come too soon. I shall hear the taxi out there running its engine, till I walk calmly down to it through the hall. I’ll ring up – But no the telephone is cut off. She tugged at a knot she had tied wrong.

The idea of flight. He was never kind to me, not really. I don’t remember him kind at all. Mother said he never considered me. He was set on me, that was

THE DEMON LOVER

what it was – not love Not love, not meaning a person well What did he do, to make me promise like, that? I can't remember – But she found that she could

She remembered with such dreadful acuteness that the twenty-five years since then dissolved like smoke and she instinctively looked for the weal left by the button on the palm of her hand She remembered not only all that he said and did but the complete suspension of *her* existence during that August week I was not myself – they all told me so at the time She remembered – but with one white burning blank as where acid has dropped on a photograph *under no conditions* could she remember his face

So, wherever he may be waiting, I shall not know him You have no time to run from a face you do not expect

The thing was to get to the taxi before any clock struck what could be the hour She would slip down the street and round the side of the square to where the square gave on the main road She would return in the taxi, safe, to her own door, and bring the solid driver into the house with her to pick up the parcels from room to room The idea of the taxi driver made her decisive, bold she unlocked her door, went to the top of the staircase and listened down

She heard nothing – but while she was hearing nothing the *passé* air of the staircase was disturbed by a draught that travelled up to her face It emanated from the basement down there a door or window was being opened by someone who chose this moment to leave the house

The rain had stopped, the pavements steamily shone as Mrs Drover let herself out by inches from her own front door into the empty street The unoccupied houses opposite continued to meet her look with their damaged stare Making towards the thoroughfare and the taxi,

THE DEMON LOVER

she tried not to keep looking behind. Indeed, the silence was so intense — one of those creeks of London's silence exaggerated this summer by the damage of war — that no tread could have gained on hers unheard. Where her street debouched on the square where people went on living, she grew conscious of, and checked, her unnatural pace. Across the open end of the square two buses impassively passed each other women, a perambulator, cyclists, a man wheeling a barrow signalized, once again, the ordinary flow of life. At the square's most populous corner should be — and was — the short taxi rank. This evening, only one taxi — but this, although it presented its blank rump, appeared already to be alertly waiting for her. Indeed, without looking round the driver started his engine as she panted up from behind and put her hand on the door. As she did so, the clock struck seven. The taxi faced the main road to make the trip back to her house it would have to turn — she had settled back on the seat and the taxi *had* turned before she, surprised by its knowing movement, recollected that she had not 'said where'. She leaned forward to scratch at the glass panel that divided the driver's head from her own.

The driver braked to what was almost a stop, turned round and slid the glass panel back. The jolt of this flung Mrs. Drover forward till her face was almost into the glass. Through the aperture driver and passenger, not six inches between them, remained for an eternity eye to eye. Mrs. Drover's mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream. After that she continued to scream freely and to beat with her gloved hands on the glass all round as the taxi, accelerating without mercy, made off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets.

CARELESS TALK

'How good, how kind, how thoughtful!' said Mary Dash 'I can't tell you what a difference they will make! And you brought them like this all the way from Shepton Mallet in the train' She looked helpless 'Where do you think I had better put them? This table's going to be terribly small for four, and *thunk*, if one of Eric Farnham's sweeping gesticulations She signalled a waiter 'I want these put somewhere for me till the end of lunch *Carefully*,' she added 'They are three eggs' The waiter bowed and took the parcel away 'I do hope they will be all right,' said Mrs Dash, looking suspiciously after him 'But at least they'll be quieter with the hats, or something I expect you see how crowded everywhere is'

Joanna looked round the restaurant and saw The waiters had to melt to get past the backs of the chairs, between the net-curtained windows, drowsy with August rain, mirrors reflected heads in smoke and electric light and the glitter of buttons on uniforms Every European tongue struck its own note, with exclamatory English on top of all As fast as people went wading out people came wading in, and so many greeted each other that Joanna might easily have felt out of it She had not lunched in London for four months and could not resist saying so to her friend

'Honestly, you haven't deteriorated,' said Mary

CARELESS TALK

Herself, she was looking much as ever, with orchids pinned on to her last year's black 'Then how lucky I caught you just today! And I'm glad the others will be late The only men one likes now are always late While it's still just you and me, there's so much to say I don't know what I've done without you, Joanna' She fixed enraptured eyes on Joanna's face 'For instance, can you tell me what's become of the Stones?'

'No, I'm afraid I can't I '

'And Edward and I were wondering if you could tell us about the Hickneys I know they are somewhere in Dorset or Somerset They're not by any chance anywhere near you? Well, never mind Tell me about yourself'

But at this point Eric Farnham joined them 'You don't know how sorry I am,' he said 'I was kept But you found the table all right Well, Joanna, this couldn't be nicer, could it?'

'Isn't she looking radiant?' said Mary Dash 'We have been having the most tremendous talk'

Eric was now at the War Office, and Joanna, who had not seen him in uniform before, looked at him naively, twice He reminded her of one of the pictures arrived at in that paper game when, by drawing on folded-over paper, you add to one kind of body an intriguingly wrong kind of head He met her second look kindly through his shell-rimmed glasses 'How do you think the war is going?' she said

'Oh, we mustn't ask him things,' said Mary quickly 'He's doing most frightfully secret work' But this was lost on Eric, who was consulting his wristwatch 'As Ponsonby's later than I am,' he said, 'that probably means he'll be pretty late Though God knows what

THE DEMON LOVER

they do at that Ministry I propose not waiting for Ponsonby First of all, what will you two drink?"

"Ponsonby" Joanna said

"No, I don't expect you'd know him He's only been about lately," said Mary "He's an expert, he's very interesting"

"He could be," said Eric "He was at one time But he's not supposed to be interesting just now" The drinks came, then they got together over the *cartes du jour* Ponsonby did not arrive till just after the potted shrimps "This is dreadful," he said "I do hope you'll forgive me But things keep on happening, you know" He nodded rapidly round to several tables, then dropped exhausted into his place "Eat?" he said "Oh, really, anything-shrimps After that, whatever you're all doing"

"Well, Mary's for grouse," said Eric Ponsonby, after an instant of concentration, said, "In that case, grouse will do me fine"

"Now you must talk to Joanna," said Mary Dash "She's just brought me three eggs from the country and she's longing to know about everything"

Ponsonby gave Joanna a keen, considering look "Is it true," he said, "that in the country there are no cigarettes at all?"

"I believe there are sometimes some But I don't -"

"There are Then that alters everything," said Ponsonby "How lucky you are!"

"I got my hundred this morning," said Eric, "from my regular man But those will have to last me to Saturday I can't seem to cut down, somehow Mary, have you cut down?"

"I've got my own, if that's what you mean," said she "I just got twenty out of my hairdresser" She raised her

CARELESS TALK

shilling-size portion of butter from its large bed of ice and spread it tenderly over her piece of toast. ‘Now, what is your news?’ she said ‘Not that I’m asking anything, of course’

‘I don’t think anything’s happened to me,’ said Eric, ‘or that anything else has happened that you wouldn’t know about. When I say happened I mean *happened*, of course. I went out of London for one night, everywhere outside London seemed to me very full. I must say I was glad to be home again.’ He unlocked his chair from the chair behind him, looked at the grouse on his plate, then took up his knife and fork.

‘Eric,’ said Mary, after a minute, ‘the waiter’s trying to tell you there’s no more of that wine *en carafe*’

‘Bring it in a bottle then. I wonder how much longer –’

‘Oh, my dear, so do I,’ said Mary. ‘One daren’t think about that. Where we were dining last night they already had several numbers scratched off the wine list. Which reminds me Edward sent you his love’

‘Oh, how is Edward?’ Joanna said ‘What is he doing?’

‘Well, I’m not strictly supposed to say. By the way, Eric, I asked Joanna, and she doesn’t know where the Stones or the Hickneys are’

‘In the case of the Hickneys, I don’t know that it matters’

‘Oh, don’t be inhuman. You know you’re not!’

‘I must say,’ said Eric, raising his voice firmly, ‘I do like London now a lot of those people have gone. Not you, Joanna, we all miss you very much. Why don’t you come back? You’ve no idea how nice it is’

Joanna, colouring slightly, said, ‘I’ve got no place left to come back to. Belmont Square –’

THE DEMON LOVER

'Oh, my Lord, yes,' he said 'I did hear about your house I was so sorry Completely? Still, you don't want a house, you know None of us live in houses You could move in on someone Sylvia has moved in on Mona - '

'That's not a good example,' said Mary quickly 'Mona moved out almost at once and moved in on Isobel, but the worst of that is that now Isobel wants her husband back, and meanwhile Sylvia's taken up with a young man, so Mona can't move back to her own flat But what would make it difficult for Joanna is having taken on all those hens Haven't you?"

'Yes, and I have evacuees - '

'But we won't talk about those, will we?' said Mary quickly 'Any more than you would want to hear about bombs I think one great rule is never to bore each other Eric, *what's* that you are saying to Ponsonby?"

Eric and Ponsonby had seized the occasion to exchange a few rapid remarks They stopped immediately 'It was quite boring,' Ponsonby explained

'I don't believe you,' said Mary 'These days everything's frightfully interesting Joanna, you must be feeling completely dazed Will everyone ask *you* things when you get home?"

'The worst of the country these days,' said Joanna, 'is everyone gets so wrapped up in their own affairs'

'Still, surely they must want to know about us? I suppose London is too much the opposite,' said Mary 'One lives in a perfect whirl of ideas Ponsonby, who was that man I saw you with at the Meunrière? "I was certain I knew his face'

'That was a chap called Odgers Perhaps he reminded you of somebody else? We were talking shop I think

CARELESS TALK

that's a nice place, don't you? I always think they do veal well That reminds me, Eric Was your friend the other evening a Pole, or what?"

"The fact is I hardly know him," said Eric "I'm never quite sure of his name myself He's a Pole all right, but Poles aren't really my thing He was quite interesting, as a matter of fact, he had quite a line of his own on various things Oh, well, it was nothing particular No, I can't do you Poles, Mary Warrington's really the man for Poles'

"I know he is, but he keeps them all up his sleeve You do know about Edward and the Free French? I hope it didn't matter my having told you that, but Edward took it for granted that you already knew"

Ponsonby recoiled from his wristwatch "Good heavens," he said, "it *can't* be as late as this? If it *is*, there's someone waiting for me"

"Look," said Eric, "I'll hurry on coffee"

"You know," Mary added anxiously, "you really can't concentrate without your coffee Though I know we mustn't be difficult It's like this all the time," she said to Joanna "Have *you* got to hurry, Eric?"

"I needn't exactly hurry I just ought to keep an eye on the time"

"I'll do that for you," Mary said "I'd love to You see you've hardly had a word with Joanna, and she's wanting so much to catch up with life I tell you one thing that *is* worrying me that waiter I gave Joanna's lovely eggs to hasn't been near this table again Do you think I put temptation right in his way? Because, do you know, all the time we've been talking I've been thinking up a new omelette I want to make One's mind gets like that

THE DEMON LOVER

these days,' she said to Joanna 'One seems able to think of twenty things at one time Eric, do you think you could flag the *maître d'hôtel*? I don't know how I'd feel if I lost three eggs'

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

THE family walking party, though it comprised so many, did not deploy or straggle over the stubble but kept in a procession of threes and twos Papa, who carried his Alpine stick, led, flanked by Constance and little Arthur Robert and Cousin Theodore, locked in studious talk, had Emily attached but not quite abreast Next came Digby and Lucius, taking, to left and right, imaginary aim at rooks Henrietta and Sarah brought up the rear

It was Sarah who saw the others ahead on the blond stubble, who knew them, knew what they were to each other, knew their names and knew her own. It was she who felt the stubble under her feet, and who heard it give beneath the tread of the others a continuous different more distant soft stiff scrunch The field and all these outlying fields in view knew as Sarah knew that they were Papa's The harvest had been good and was now in he was satisfied — for this afternoon he had made the instinctive choice of his most womanly daughter, most nearly infant son Arthur, whose hand Papa was holding, took an anxious hop, a skip and a jump to every stride of the great man's As for Constance — Sarah could often see the flash of her hat-feather as she turned her head, the curve of her close bodice as she turned her torso Constance gave Papa her attention but not her thoughts, for she had already been sought in marriage

THE DEMON LOVER

The landowner's daughters, from Constance down, walked with their beetle-green, mole or maroon skirts gathered up and carried clear of the ground, but for Henrietta, who was still ankle-free They walked inside a continuous stuffy sound, but left silence behind them Behind them, rooks that had risen and circled, sun striking blue from their blue-black wings, planed one by one to the earth and settled to peck again Papa and the boys were dark-clad as the rooks but with no sheen, but for their white collars

It was Sarah who located the thoughts of Constance, knew what a twisting prisoner was Arthur's hand, felt to the depths of Emily's pique at Cousin Theodore's inattention, rejoiced with Digby and Lucius at the imaginary fall of so many rooks She fell back, however, as from a rocky range, from the converse of Robert and Cousin Theodore Most she knew that she swam with love at the nearness of Henrietta's young and alert face and eyes which shone with the sky and queried the afternoon

She recognized the colour of valediction, tasted sweet sadness, while from the cottage inside the screen of trees wood-smoke rose melting pungent and blue This was the eve of the brothers' return to school It was like a Sunday, Papa had kept the late afternoon free, all (all but one) encircling Robert, Digby and Lucius, they walked the estate the brothers would not see again for so long Robert, it could be felt, was not unwilling to return to his books, next year he would go to college like Theodore, besides, to all this they saw he was not the heir. But in Digby and Lucius arning and popping hid a bodily grief, the repugnance of victims, though these two were further from being heirs than Robert

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

Sarah said to Henrietta 'To think they will not be here tomorrow!'

'Is that what you are thinking about?' Henrietta asked, with her subtle taste for the truth

'More, I was thinking that you and I will be back again by one another at table '

'You know we are always sad when the boys are going, but we are never sad when the boys have gone' The sweet reciprocal guilty smile that started on Henrietta's lips finished on those of Sarah 'Also,' the young sister said, 'we know this is only something happening again It happened last year, and it will happen next But oh how should I feel, and how should you feel, if it were something that had not happened before?'

'For instance, when Constance goes to be married?'

'Oh, I don't mean *Constance*!' said Henrietta

'So long,' said Sarah, considering, 'as, whatever it is, it happens to both of us' She must never have to wake in the early morning except to the birdlike stirrings of Henrietta, or have her cheek brushed in the dark by the frill of another pillow in whose hollow did not repose Henrietta's cheek Rather than they should cease to lie in the same bed she prayed they might lie in the same grave 'You and I will stay as we are,' she said, 'then nothing can touch one without touching the other'

'So you say, so I hear you say!' exclaimed Henrietta, who then, lips apart, sent Sarah her most tormenting look 'But I cannot forget that you chose to be born without me, that you would not wait——' But here she broke off, laughed outright and said 'Oh, see!'

Ahead of them there had been a dislocation Emily took advantage of having gained the ridge to kneel down to tie her bootlace so abruptly that Digby all but fell

THE DEMON LOVER

over her, with an exclamation Cousin Theodore had been civil enough to pause beside Emily, but Robert, lost to all but what he was saying, strode on, head down, only just not colliding into Papa and Constance, who had turned to look back Papa, astounded, let go of Arthur's hand, whereupon Arthur fell flat on the stubble

‘Dear me,’ said the affronted Constance to Robert

Papa said ‘What is the matter there? May I ask, Robert, where you are going, sir? Digby, remember that is your sister Emily’

‘Cousin Emily is in trouble,’ said Cousin Theodore

Poor Emily, telescoped in her skirts and by now scarlet under her hatbrim, said in a muffled voice ‘It is just my bootlace, Papa’

‘Your bootlace, Emily?’

‘I was just tying it’

‘Then you had better tie it – Am I to think,’ said Papa, looking round them all, ‘that you must all go down like a pack of ninepins because Emily has occasion to stoop?’

At this Henrietta uttered a little whoop, flung her arms round Sarah, buried her face in her sister and fairly suffered with laughter She could contain this no longer, she shook all over Papa, who found Henrietta so hopelessly out of order that he took no notice of her except at table, took no notice, simply giving the signal for the others to collect themselves and move on Cousin Theodore, helping Emily to her feet, could be seen to see how her heightened colour became her, but she dispensed with his hand chillily, looked elsewhere, touched the brooch at her throat and said ‘Thank you, I have not sustained an accident’ Digby apologized to Emily, Robert to Papa and Constance Constance

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

righted Arthur, flcking his breeches over with her handkerchief All fell into their different steps and resumed their way

Sarah, with no idea how to console laughter, coaxed, 'Come, come, come,' into Henrietta's ear Between the girls and the others the distance widened, it began to seem that they would be left alone

'And why not?' said Henrietta, lifting her head in answer to Sarah's thought

They looked around them with the same eyes The shorn uplands seemed to float on the distance, which extended dazzling to tiny blue glassy hills There was no end to the afternoon, whose light went on ripening now they had scythed the corn Light filled the silence which, now Papa and the others were out of hearing, was complete Only screens of trees intersected and knolls made islands in the vast fields The mansion and the home farm had sunk for ever below them in the expanse of woods, so that hardly a ripple showed where the girls dwelled

The shadow of the same rook circling passed over Sarah then over Henrietta, who in their turn cast one shadow across the stubble 'But, Henrietta, we cannot stay here for ever'

Henrietta immediately turned her eyes to the only lonely plume of smoke, from the cottage 'Then let us go and visit the poor old man He is dying and the others are happy One day we shall pass and see no more smoke, then soon his roof will fall in, and we shall always be sorry we did not go today'

'But he no longer remembers us any longer'

'All the same, he will feel us there in the door'

'But can we forget this is Robert's and Digby's and

THE DEMON LOVER

Lucius's goodbye walk? It would be heartless of both of us to neglect them'

'Then how heartless Fitzgeorge is!' smiled Henrietta
'Fitzgeorge is himself, the eldest and in the Army
Fitzgeorge I'm afraid is not an excuse for us'

A resigned sigh, or perhaps the pretence of one, heaved up Henrietta's still narrow bosom To delay matters for just a moment more she shaded her eyes with one hand, to search the distance like a sailor looking for a sail She gazed with hope and zeal in every direction but that in which she and Sarah were bound to go Then - 'Oh, but Sarah, here *they* are, coming - they are' she cried She brought out her handkerchief and began to fly it, drawing it to and fro through the windless air

In the glass of the distance, two horsemen came into view, cantering on a grass track between the fields When the track dropped into a hollow they dropped with it, but by now the drumming of hoofs was heard The reverberation filled the land, the silence and Sarah's being, not watching for the riders to reappear she instead fixed her eyes on her sister's handkerchief which, let hang limp while its owner intently waited, showed a bitten corner as well as a damson stain Again it became a flag, in furious motion - 'Wave too, Sarah, wave too! Make your bracelet flash!'

'They must have seen us if they will ever see us,' said Sarah, standing still as a stone

Henrietta's waving at once ceased Facing her sister she crunched up her handkerchief, as though to stop it acting a lie 'I can see you are shy,' she said in a dead voice 'So shy you won't even wave to *Fitzgeorge*'

Her way of not speaking the *other* name had a hundred

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

meanings, she drove them all in by the way she did not look at Sarah's face. The impulsive breath she had caught stole silently out again, while her eyes — till now at their brightest, their most speaking — dulled with uncomprehending solitary alarm. The ordeal of awaiting Eugene's approach thus became for Sarah, from moment to moment, torture.

Fitzgeorge, Papa's heir, and his friend Eugene, the young neighbouring squire, struck off the track and rode up at a trot with their hats doffed. Sun striking low turned Fitzgeorge's flesh to coral and made Eugene blink his dark eyes. The young men reined in, the girls looked up the horses. 'And my father, Constance, the others?' Fitzgeorge demanded, as though the stubble had swallowed them.

'Ahead, on the way to the quarry, the other side of the hill.'

'We heard you were all walking together,' Fitzgeorge said, seeming dissatisfied.

'We are following.'

'What, alone?' said Eugene, speaking for the first time.

'Forlorn!' glittered Henrietta, raising two mocking hands.

Fitzgeorge considered, said 'Good' severely, and signified to Eugene that they would ride on. But too late Eugene had dismounted. Fitzgeorge saw, shrugged and flicked his horse to a trot, but Eugene led his slowly between the sisters. Or rather, Sarah walked on his left hand, the horse on his right and Henrietta the other side of the horse. Henrietta, acting like somebody quite alone, looked up at the sky, idly holding one of the empty stirrups. Sarah, however, looked at the ground,

THE DEMON LOVER

with Eugene inclined as though to speak but not speaking Enfolded, dizzied, blinded as though inside a wave, she could feel his features carved in brightness above her Alongside the slender stepping of his horse, Eugene matched his naturally long free step to hers His elbow was through the reins, with his fingers he brushed back the lock that his bending to her had sent falling over his forehead She recorded the sublime act and knew what smile shaped his lips So each without looking trembled before an image, while slow colour burned up the curves of her cheeks The consummation would be when their eyes met

At the other side of the horse, Henrietta began to sing At once her pain, like a scientific ray, passed through the horse and Eugene to penetrate Sarah's heart

We surmount the skyline the family come into our view, we into theirs They are halted, waiting, on the decline to the quarry The handsome statued group in strong yellow sunshine, aligned by Papa and crowned by Fitzgeorge, turn their judging eyes on the laggards, waiting to close their ranks round Henrietta and Sarah and Eugene One more moment and it will be too late, no further communication will be possible Stop oh stop Henrietta's heartbreaking singing! Embrace her close again! Speak the only possible word! Say - oh, say what? Oh, the word is lost!

'Henrietta'

A shock of striking pain in the knuckles of the outflung hand - Sarah's? The eyes, opening, saw that the hand had struck, not been struck there was a corner of a table Dust, whitish and gritty, lay on the top of the table and on the telephone Dull but piercing white

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

light filled the room and what was left of the ceiling,
her first thought was that it must have snowed. If so,
it was winter now

Through the calico stretched and tacked over the window came the sound of a piano someone was playing Tchaikowsky badly in a room without windows or doors From somewhere else in the hollowness came a cascade of hammering Close up, a voice ‘Oh, *awake, Mary?*’ It came from the other side of the open door, which jutted out between herself and the speaker – he on the threshold, she lying on the uncovered mattress of a bed The speaker added ‘I had been going away’

Summoning words from somewhere she said ‘Why?
I didn’t know you were here’

‘Evidently – Say, who is “Henrietta”?’

Despairing tears filled her eyes She drew back her hurt hand, began to suck at the knuckle and whimpered, ‘I’ve hurt myself’

A man she knew to be ‘Travis’, but failed to focus, came round the door saying ‘Really I don’t wonder’ Sitting down on the edge of the mattress he drew her hand away from her lips and held it the act, in itself gentle, was accompanied by an almost hostile stare of concern ‘Do listen, Mary,’ he said ‘While you’ve slept I’ve been all over the house again, and I’m less than ever satisfied that it’s safe In your normal senses you’d never attempt to stay here There’ve been alerts, and more than alerts, all day, one more bang anywhere near, which may happen at any moment, could bring the rest of this down You keep telling me that you have things to see to – but do you know what chaos the rooms are in? Till they’ve gone ahead with more clearing, where can you hope to start? And if there *were*

THE DEMON LOVER

anything you could do, you couldn't do it Your own nerves know that, if you don't it was almost frightening, when I looked in just now, to see the way you were sleeping - you've shut up shop'

She lay staring over his shoulder at the calico window
He went on 'You don't like it here Your self doesn't like it Your will keeps driving your self, but it can't be driven the whole way - it makes its own get-out sleep Well, I want you to sleep as much as you (really) do But not here So I've taken a room for you in a hotel, I'm going now for a taxi, you can practically make the move without waking up'

'No, I can't get into a taxi without waking
'Do you realize you're the last soul left in the terrace?'
'Then who is that playing the piano?'

'Oh, one of the furniture-movers in Number Six I didn't count the jaquerie, of course they're in possession - unsupervised, teeming, having a high old time While I looked in on you in here ten minutes ago they were smashing out that conservatory at the other end Glass being done in in cold blood - it was brutalizing You never batted an eyelid, in fact, I thought you smiled' He listened 'Yes, the piano - they are highbrow all right You know there's a workman downstairs lying on your blue sofa looking for pictures in one of your French books?'

'No,' she said, 'I've no idea who is there'

'Obviously With the lock blown off your front door anyone who likes can get in and out'

'Including you'

'Yes I've had a word with a chap about getting that lock back before tonight As for you, you don't know what is happening'

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

'I did,' she said, locking her fingers before her eyes

The unreality of this room and of Travis's presence preyed on her as figments of dreams that one knows to be dreams can do This environment's being in semi-ruin struck her less than its being some sort of device or trap, and she rejoiced, if anything, in its decrepitude As for Travis, he had his own part in the conspiracy to keep her from the beloved two She felt he began to feel he was now unmeaning She was struggling not to condemn him, scorn him for his ignorance of Henrietta, Eugene, her loss His possessive angry fondness was part, of course, of the story of him and Mary, which like a book once read she remembered clearly but with indifference Frantic at being delayed here, while the moment awaited her in the cornfield, she all but afforded a smile at the grotesquerie of being saddled with Mary's body and lover Rearing up her head from the bare pillow, she looked, as far as the crossed feet, along the form inside which she found herself trapped the irrelevant body of Mary, weighted down to the bed, wore a short black modern dress, flaked with plaster The toes of the black suède shoes by their sickly whiteness showed Mary must have climbed over fallen ceilings, dirt engraved the fate-lines in Mary's palms

This inspired her to say 'But I've made a start, I've been pulling out things of value or things I want'

For answer Travis turned to look down, expressively, at some object out of her sight, on the floor close by the bed 'I see,' he said, 'a musty old leather box gaping open with God knows what - junk, illegible letters, diaries, yellow photographs, chiefly plaster and dust Of all things, Mary! - after a missing will?'

'Everything one unburies seems the same age'

THE DEMON LOVER

'Then what are these, where do they come from - family stuff?'

'No idea,' she yawned into Mary's hand 'They may not even be mine Having a house like this that had empty rooms must have made me store more than I knew, for years I came on these, so I wondered Look if you like'

He bent and began to go through the box - it seemed to her, not unsuspiciously While he blew grit off packets and fumbled with tapes she lay staring at the exposed laths of the ceiling, calculating She then said 'Sorry if I've been cranky, about the hotel and all Go away just for two hours, then come back with a taxi, and I'll go quiet Will that do?'

'Fine - except why not now?'

'Travis ,'

'Sorry It shall be as you say You've got some good morbid stuff in this box, Mary - so far as I can see at a glance The photographs seem more your sort of thing Comic but lyrical All of one set of people - a beard, a gun and a pot hat, a schoolboy with a moustache, a phaeton drawn up in front of mansion, a group on steps, a *carte de visite* of two young ladies hand-in-hand in front of a painted field ——'

'Give that to me!'

She instinctively tried and failed, to unbutton the bosom of Mary's dress it offered no hospitality to the photograph So she could only fling herself over on the mattress, away from Travis, covering the two faces with her body Racked by that oblique look of Henrietta's she recurred, too, a sort of personal shfock at having seen Sarah for the first time

Travis's hand came over her, and she shuddered Wounded, he said 'Mary

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

'Can't you leave *me* alone?"

She did not move or look till he had gone out saying 'Then, in two hours' She did not therefore see him pick up the dangerous box, which he took away under his arm, out of her reach

They were back Now the sun was setting behind the trees, but its rays passed dazzling between the branches into the beautiful warm red room The tips of the ferns in the jardiniere curled gold, and Sarah, standing by the jardiniere, pinched at a leaf of scented geranium The carpet had a great centre wreath of pomegranates, on which no tables or chairs stood, and its whole circle was between herself and the others

No fire was lit yet, but where they were grouped was a hearth Henrietta sat on a low stool, resting her elbow above her head on the arm of Mamma's chair, looking away intently as though into a fire, idle Mamma embroidered, her needle slowed down by her thoughts, the length of tatting with roses she had already done overflowed stiffly over her supple skirts Stretched on the rug at Mamma's feet, Arthur looked through an album of Swiss views, not liking them but vowed to be very quiet Sarah, from where she stood, saw fuming cataracts and null eternal snows as poor Arthur kept turning over the pages, which had tissue paper between

Against the white marble mantelpiece stood Eugene. The dark red shadows gathering in the drawing-room as the trees drowned more and more of the sun would reach him last; perhaps never it seemed to Sarah that a lamp was lighted behind his face He was the only gentleman with the ladies Fitzgeorge had gone to the stables, Papa to give an order, Cousin Theodore was

THE DEMON LOVER

consulting a dictionary, in the gunroom Robert, Lucius and Digby went through the sad rites, putting away their guns All this was known to go on but none of it could be heard

This particular hour of subtle light – not to be fixed by the clock, for it was early in winter and late in summer and in spring and autumn now, about Arthur's bed-time – had always, for Sarah, been Henrietta's To be with her indoors or out, upstairs or down, was to share the same crepitation Her spirit ran on past yours with a laughing shiver into an element of its own Leaves and branches and mirrors in empty rooms became animate The sisters rustled and scampered and concealed themselves where nobody else was in play that was full of fear, fear that was full of play Till, by dint of making each other's hearts beat violently, Henrietta so wholly and Sarah so nearly lost all human reason that Mamma had been known to look at them searchingly as she sat instated for evening among the calm amber lamps

But now Henrietta had locked the hour inside her breast By spending it seated beside Mamma, in young imitation of Constance the Society daughter, she disclaimed for ever anything else It had always been she who with one fierce act destroyed any toy that might be outgrown She sat with straight back, poising her cheek remotely against her finger Only by never looking at Sarah did she admit their eternal loss

Eugene, not long returned from a foreign tour, spoke of travel, addressing himself to Mamma, who thought but did not speak of her wedding journey But every now and then she had to ask Henrietta to pass the scissors or tray of carded wools, and Eugene seized every such moment to look at Sarah Into eyes always brilliant

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

with melancholy he dared begin to allow no other expression But this in itself declared the conspiracy of still undeclared love For her part she looked at him as though he, transfigured by the strange light, were indeed a picture, a picture who could not see her The wall-paper now flamed scarlet behind his shoulder Mamma, Henrietta, even unknowing Arthur were in no hurry to raise their heads

Henrietta said 'If I were a man I should take my bride to Italy '

'There are mules in Switzerland,' said Arthur.

'Sarah,' said Mamma, who turned in her chair mildly, 'where are you, my love, do you never mean to sit down?'

'To Naples,' said Henrietta

'Are you not thinking of Venice?' said Eugene

'No,' returned Henrietta, 'why should I be? I should like to climb the volcano But then I am not a man, and am still less likely ever to be a bride '

'Arthur' Mamma said

'Mamma?'

'Look at the clock '

Arthur sighed politely, got up and replaced the album on the circular table, balanced upon the rest He offered his hand to Eugene, his cheek to Henrietta and to Mamma, then he started towards Sarah, who came to meet him 'Tell me, Arthur,' she said, embracing him, 'what did you do today?'

Arthur only stared with his button blue eyes 'You were there too, we went for a walk in the cornfield, with Fitzgeorge on his horse, and I fell down ' He pulled out of her arms and said 'I must go back to my beetle ' He had difficulty, as always, in turning the handle of the mahogany door Mamma waited till he had left the

THE DEMON LOVER

room, then said ‘Arthur is quite a man now, he no longer comes running to me when he has hurt himself Why, I did not even know he had fallen down Before we know, he will be going away to school too’ She sighed and lifted her eyes to Eugene ‘Tomorrow is to be a sad day’

Eugene with a gesture signified his own sorrow The sentiments of Mamma could have been uttered only here in the drawing-room, which for all its size and formality was lyrical and almost exotic There was a look like velvet in darker parts of the air, sombre window draperies let out gushes of lace, the music on the piano-forte bore tender titles, and the harp though unplayed gleamed in a corner, beyond sofas, whatnots, armchairs, occasional tables that all stood on tottering little feet At any moment a tinkle might have been struck from the lustres’ drops of the brighter day, a vibration from the musical instruments, or a quiver from the fringes and ferns But the towering vases upon the consoles, the albums piled on the tables, the shells and figurines on the flights of brackets, all had, like the alabaster Leaning Tower of Pisa, an equilibrium of their own Nothing would fall or change And everything in the drawing-room was muted, weighted, pivoted by Mamma When she added ‘We shall not feel quite the same,’ it was to be understood that she would not have spoken thus from her place at the opposite end of Papa’s table

‘Sarah,’ said Henrietta curiously, ‘what made you ask Arthur what he had been doing? Surely you have not forgotten today?’

The sisters were seldom known to address or question one another in public, it was taken that they knew each other’s minds Mamma, though untroubled, looked

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

from one to the other Henrietta continued ‘No day, least of all today, is like any other – Surely that must be true?’ she said to Eugene ‘You will never forget my waving my handkerchief?’

Before Eugene had composed an answer, she turned to Sarah ‘Or *you*, them riding across the fields?’

Eugene also slowly turned his eyes on Sarah, as though awaiting with something like dread her answer to the question he had not asked. She drew a light little gold chair into the middle of the wreath of the carpet, where no one ever sat, and sat down. She said ‘But since then I think I have been asleep’.

‘Charles the First walked and talked half an hour after his head was cut off,’ said Henrietta mockingly. Sarah in anguish pressed the palms of her hands together upon a shred of geranium leaf.

‘How else,’ she said, ‘could I have had such a bad dream?’

‘That must be the explanation!’ said Henrietta

‘A trifle fanciful,’ said Mamma

However rash it might be to speak at all, Sarah wished she knew how to speak more clearly. The obscurity and loneliness of her trouble was not to be borne. How could she put into words the feeling of dislocation, the formless dread that had been with her since she found herself in the drawing-room? The source of both had been what she must call her dream. How could she tell the others with what vehemence she tried to attach her being to each second, not because each was singular in itself, each a drop condensed from the mist of love in the room, but because she apprehended that the seconds were numbered? Her hope was that the others at least half knew. Were Henrietta and Eugene able to understand

THE DEMON LOVER

how completely, how nearly for ever, she had been swept from them, would they not without fail each grasp one of her hands? — She went so far as to throw her hands out, as though alarmed by a wasp. The shred of geranium fell to the carpet.

Mamma, tracing this behaviour of Sarah's to only one cause, could not but think reproachfully of Eugene. Delightful as his conversation had been, he would have done better had he paid this call with the object of interviewing Papa. Turning to Henrietta she asked her to ring for the lamps, as the sun had set.

Eugene, no longer where he had stood, was able to make no gesture towards the bell-rope. His dark head was under the tide of dusk, for, down on one knee on the edge of the wreath, he was feeling over the carpet for what had fallen from Sarah's hand. In the inevitable silence rooks on the return from the fields could be heard streaming over the house, their sound filled the sky and even the room, and it appeared so useless to ring the bell that Henrietta stayed quivering by Mamma's chair. Eugene rose, brought out his fine white handkerchief and, while they watched, enfolded carefully in it what he had just found, then returning the handkerchief to his breast pocket. This was done so deep in the reverie that accompanies any final act that Mamma instinctively murmured to Henrietta 'But you will be my child when Arthur has gone.'

The door opened for Constance to appear on the threshold. Behind her queenly figure globes approached, swimming in their own light these were the lamps for which Henrietta had not rung, but these first were put on the hall tables. 'Why, Mamma,' exclaimed Constance, 'I cannot see who is with you!'

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

'Eugene is with us,' said Henrietta, 'but on the point of asking if he may send for his horse'

'Indeed?' said Constance to Eugene 'Fitzgeorge has been asking for you, but I cannot tell where he is now'

The figures of Emily, Lucius and Cousin Theodore criss-crossed the lamplight there in the hall, to mass behind Constance's in the drawing-room door Emily, over her sister's shoulder, said 'Mamma, Lucius wishes to ask you whether for once he may take his guitar to school' - 'One objection, however,' said Cousin Theodore, 'is that Lucius's trunk is already locked and strapped' 'Since Robert is taking his box of inks,' said Lucius, 'I do not see why I should not take my guitar' - 'But Robert,' said Constance, 'will soon be going to college'

Lucius squeezed past the others into the drawing-room in order to look anxiously at Mamma, who said 'You have thought of this late, we must go and see' The others parted to let Mamma, followed by Lucius, out Then Constance, Emily and Cousin Theodore deployed and sat down in different parts of the drawing-room, to await the lamps

'I am glad the rooks have done passing over,' said Emily, 'they make me nervous' - 'Why?' yawned Constance haughtily, 'what do you think could happen?' Robert and Digby silently came in

Eugene said to Sarah 'I shall be back tomorrow'

'But, oh - ' she began She turned to cry 'Henrietta'

'Why, what is the matter?' said Henrietta, unseen at the back of the gold chair 'What could be sooner than tomorrow?'

'But something terrible may be going to happen'

THE DEMON LOVER

'There cannot fail to be tomorrow,' said Eugene gravely.

'I will see that there is tomorrow,' said Henrietta

'You will never let me out of your sight?'

Eugene, addressing himself to Henrietta, said 'Yes, promise her what she asks

Henrietta cried 'She *is* never out of my sight Who are you to ask me that, you Eugene? Whatever tries to come between me and Sarah becomes nothing Yes, come tomorrow, come sooner, come - when you like, but no one will ever be quite alone with Sarah You do not even know what you are trying to do It is *you* who are making something terrible happen - Sarah, tell him that that is true! Sarah —'

The others, in the dark on the chairs and sofas, could be felt to turn their judging eyes upon Sarah, who, as once before, could not speak —

— The house rocked simultaneously the calico window split and more ceiling fell, though not on the bed The enormous dull sound of the explosion died, leaving a minor trickle of dissolution still to be heard in parts of the house Until the choking stinging plaster dust had had time to settle, she lay with lips pressed close, nostrils not breathing and eyes shut Remembering the box, Mary wondered if it had been again buried No, she found, looking over the edge of the bed that had been unable to happen because the box was missing Travis, who must have taken it, would when he came back no doubt explain why She looked at her watch, which had stopped, which was not surprising, she did not remember winding it for the last two days, but then she could not remember much Through the torn window appeared the

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

timelessness of an impermeably clouded late summer afternoon

There being nothing left, she wished he would come to take her to the hotel. The one way back to the fields was barred by Mary's surviving the fall of ceiling. Sarah was right in doubting that there would be tomorrow. Eugene, Henrietta were lost in time to the woman weeping there on the bed, no longer reckoning who she was.

At last she heard the taxi, then Travis hurrying up the littered stairs 'Mary, you're all right, Mary - *another*?' Such a helpless white face came round the door that she could only hold out her arms and say 'Yes, but where have *you* been?'

'You said two hours But I wish ——'

'I have missed you'

'Have you? Do you know you are crying?'

'Yes How are we to live without natures? We only know inconvenience now, not sorrow. Everything pulverizes so easily because it is rot-dry, one can only wonder that it makes so much noise. The source, the sap must have dried up, or the pulse must have stopped, before *you* and I were conceived. So much flowed through people, so little flows through us. All we can do is imitate love or sorrow — Why did you take away my box?'

He only said 'It is in my office'

She continued 'What has happened is cruel. I am left with a fragment torn out of a day, a day I don't even know where or when, and now how am I to help laying that like a pattern against the poor stuff of everything else? — Alternatively, I am a person drained by a dream I cannot forget the climate of those hours. Or life at that

THE DEMON LOVER

pitch, eventful – not happy, no, but strung like a harp
I have had a sister called Henrietta ’

‘And I have been looking inside your box What else
can you expect? – I have had to write off this day, from
the work point of view, thanks to you So could I sit
and do nothing for the last two hours? I just glanced
through this and that – still, I know the family ’

‘You said it was morbid stuff ’

‘Did I? I still say it gives off something ’

She said ‘And then there was Eugene ’

‘Probably I don’t think I came on much of his except
some notes he must have made for Fitzgeorge from some
book on scientific farming Well, there it is I have sorted
everything out and put it back again, all but a lock of
hair that tumbled out of a letter I could not trace So
I’ve got the hair in my pocket ’

‘What colour is it?’

‘Ash-brown Of course, it is a bit – desiccated Do you
want it?’

‘No,’ she said with a shudder ‘Really, Travis, what
revenges you take!’

‘I didn’t look at it that way,’ he said puzzled

‘Is the taxi waiting?’ Mary got off the bed and, pick-
ing her way across the room, began to look about for
things she ought to take with her, now and then stopping
to brush her dress She took the mirror out of her bag to
see how dirty her face was ‘Travis – ’ she said suddenly

‘Mary?’

‘Only, I — ’

‘That’s all right Don’t let us imitate anything just at
present ’

In the taxi, looking out of the window, she said ‘I
suppose, then, that I am descended from Sarah?’

THE HAPPY AUTUMN FIELDS

'No,' he said, 'that would be impossible There must be some reason why you should have those papers, but that is not the one From all negative evidence Sarah, like Henrietta, remained unmarried I found no mention of either, after a certain date, in the letters of Constance, Robert or Emily, which makes it seem likely both died young Fitzgeorge refers, in a letter to Robert written in his old age, to some friend of their youth who was thrown from his horse and killed, riding back after a visit to their home The young man, whose name doesn't appear, was alone, and the evening, which was in autumn, was fine though late Fitzgeorge wonders, and says he will always wonder, what made the horse shy in those empty fields '

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

Ivy gripped and sucked at the flight of steps, down which with such a deceptive wildness it seemed to be flowing like a cascade. Ivy matted the door at the top and amassed in bushes above and below the porch. More, it had covered, or one might feel consumed, one entire half of the high, double-fronted house, from the basement up to a spiked gable it had attained about half-way up to the girth and more than the density of a tree, and was sagging outward under its own weight. One was left to guess at the size and the number of windows hidden by looking at those in the other side. But these, though in sight, had been made effectively sightless sheets of some dark composition that looked like metal were sealed closely into their frames. The house, not old, was of dull red brick with stone trimmings.

To crown all, the ivy was now in fruit, clustered over with fleshy pale green berries. There was something brutal about its fecundity. It was hard to credit that such a harvest could have been nourished only on brick and stone. Had not reason insisted that the lost windows must, like their fellows, have been made fast, so that the suckers for all their seeking voracity could not enter, one could have convinced oneself that the ivy must be feeding on something inside the house?

The process of strangulation could be felt one won-

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

dered how many more years of war would be necessary for this to complete itself And, the conventionality of the house, the remains, at least, of order in its surroundings made what was happening more and more an anomaly Mrs Nicholson's house had always enjoyed distinction – that of being detached, while its neighbours, though equally 'good', had been erected in couples or even in blocks of four, that of being the last in the avenue, that of having on one hand as neighbour the theatre, to whose façade its front was at right angles The theatre, set back behind shallow semi-circular gardens, at once crowned and terminated the avenue, which ran from it to the Promenade overhanging the sea And the house, apart from the prestige of standing just where it stood, had had the air of reserving something quite of its own It was thus perhaps just, or not unfitting, that it should have been singled out for this gothic fate

This was, or had been, one of the best residential avenues in Southstone, into which private hotels intruded only with the most breathless, costly discretion if it was not that now it was nothing else, for there was nothing else for it to be Lines of chestnut trees had been planted along the pavements, along the railed strip of lawn that divided the avenue down the middle – now, the railings were, with all other ironwork, gone, and where the lawn was very long rusty grass grew up into the tangles of rusty barbed wire On to this, as on to the concrete pyramids — which, in the course of four years of waiting to be pushed out to obstruct the invader, had sunk some inches into the soil — the chestnuts were now dropping their leaves

The decline dated from the exodus of the summer of

THE DEMON LOVER

1940, when Southstone had been declared in the front line. The houses at the sea end of the avenue had, like those on the Promenade, been requisitioned, but some of those at the theatre end stayed empty. Here and there, portions of porches or balustrades had fallen into front gardens, crushing their overgrowth, but there were no complete ruins, no bomb or shell had arrived immediately here, and effects of blast, though common to all of Southstone, were less evident than desuetude and decay. It was now the September of 1944, and, for some reason, the turn of the tide of war, the accumulation of the Invasion victories, gave Southstone its final air of defeat. The withdrawal of most of the soldiers, during the summer, had drained off adventitious vitality. The A A batteries, this month, were on the move to another part of the coast. And, within the very last few days, the silencing of the guns across the Channel had ended the tentative love affair with death. Southstone's life, no longer kept to at least a pitch by shelling warnings, now had nothing but an etiolated slowness. In the shuttered shopping streets along the Promenade, in the intersecting avenues, squares and crescents, vacuum mounted up. The lifting of the ban on the area had, so far, brought few visitors in.

This afternoon, for minutes together, not a soul, not even a soldier, crossed the avenue. Gavin Doddington stood to regard the ivy in what was, virtually, solitude. The sky being clouded, though not dark, a timeless flat light fell on to everything. Outside the theatre a very few soldiers stood grouped about, some moodily, some in no more than apathy. The theatre gardens had been cemented over to make a lorry park, and the engine of one of the lorries was being run.

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

Mrs Nicholson could not be blamed for the ivy *her* absence from Southstone was of long standing, for she had died in 1912 – two years before the outbreak of what Gavin still thought of as Admiral Concannon's war. After her death, the house had been put up for auction by her executors since then, it might well have changed hands two or three times. Probably few of the residents dislodged in 1940 had so much as heard Mrs Nicholson's name. In its condition, today, the house was a paradox having been closed and sealed up with extreme care, it had been abandoned in a manner no less extreme. It had been nobody's business to check the ivy. Nor, apparently, had there been anybody to authorize a patriotic sacrifice of the railings – Gavin Doddington, prodding between the strands of ivy, confirmed his impression that that iron lacework still topped the parapet of the front garden. He could pursue with his finger, though not see, the pattern that with other details of the house, outside and in, had long ago been branded into his memory. Looking up at the windows in the exposed half he saw, still in position along the sills, miniature reproductions of this pattern, for the support of window boxes. Those, which were gone, had been flowery in her day.

The assumption was that, as lately as 1940, Mrs Nicholson's house *had* belonged to someone, but that it belonged to nobody now. The late owner's death in some other part of England must have given effect to a will not brought up to date, by which the property passed to an heir who could not be found – to somebody not heard of since Singapore fell or not yet reported anything more than 'missing' after a raid on London or a battle abroad. Legal hold-ups dotted the world-

wide mess So reasoning, Gavin Doddington gave rein to what had been his infant and was now his infantile passion for explanation But also he attached himself to the story as to something nothing to do with him, and did so with the intensity of a person who must think lest he should begin to feel

His passion for explanation had been, when he knew Mrs Nicholson, raised by her power of silently baulking it into the principal reason for suffering It had been among the stigmata of his extreme youth – he had been eight when he met her, ten when she died He had not been back to Southstone since his last stay with her

Now, the lifting of the official ban on the area had had the effect of bringing him straight back – why? When what one has refused is put out of reach, when what one has avoided becomes forbidden, some lessening of the inhibition may well occur The ban had so acted on his reluctance that, when the one was removed, the other came away with it – as a scab, adhering, comes off with a wad of lint The transmutation, due to the fall of France, of his '*I cannot go back to Southstone*' into '*One cannot go there*' must have been salutary, or, at least, exteriorizing It so happened that when the ban came off he had been due for a few days' leave from the Ministry He had at once booked a room at one of the few hotels that remained at the visitor's disposition

Arriving at Southstone yesterday evening, he had confined his stroll in the hazy marine dusk to the cracked, vacant and wire-looped Promenade – from which he returned with little more than the wish that he had, after all, brought somebody down here with him Amorist since his 'teens, he had not often set off on a holiday unaccompanied The idea of this as a pilgrimage

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

revolted him he remained in the bar till the bar closed This morning he had no more than stalked the house, approaching it in wavering closing circles through the vaguer Southstone areas of association He had fixed for the actual confrontation that hour, deadline for feeling, immediately after lunch

The story originated in a friendship between two young girls in their Dresden finishing year Edith and Lilian had kept in touch throughout later lives that ran very widely apart - their letters, regularly exchanged, were perhaps more confidential than their infrequent meetings Edith had married a country gentleman, Lilian a business man Jimmie Nicholson had bought the Southstone house for his wife in 1907, not long before his death, which had been the result of a stroke He had been senior by about fifteen years their one child, a daughter, had died at birth

Edith Doddington, who had never been quite at ease on the subject of Lilian's marriage, came to stay more often now her friend was a widow, but still could not come as often as both would have liked Edith's own married life was one of contrivance and of anxiety After money, the most pressing of Edith's worries centred round the health of her second son Gavin had been from birth a delicate little boy The damp of his native county, inland and low-lying, did not suit him there was the constant question of change of air - till his health stabilized, he could not go away to school It was natural that Lilian, upon discovering this, should write inviting Gavin to stay at Southstone - ideally, of course, let his mother bring him, but if Edith could not be free, let him come alone Mrs Nicholson hoped he

THE DEMON LOVER

and she, who had not yet met, would not, or would not for long, be shy of each other Her maid Rockham was, at any rate, good with children

Gavin had heard of Southstone as the scene of his mother's only exotic pleasures The maid Rockham was sent to London to meet him the two concluded their journey with the absurdly short drive, in an open victoria, from the station to Mrs Nicholson's house It was early in what was a blazing June the awnings over the windows rippled, the marguerites in the window-boxes undulated, in a hot breeze coming down the avenue from the sea From the awnings the rooms inside took a tense bright dusk In the sea-blue drawing-room, up whose walls reared mirrors framed in ivory brackets, Gavin was left to await Mrs Nicholson He had time to marvel at the variety of the bric-à-brac crowding brackets and tables, the manyness of the cut-crystal vases, the earliness of the purple and white sweet pea – at the Doddingtons', sweet pea did not flower before July Mrs Nicholson then entered to his surprise she did not kiss him

Instead, she stood looking down at him – she was tall – with a glittering, charming uncertainty Her head bent a little lower, during consideration not so much of Gavin as of the moment Her *coiffeur* was like spun sugar that its crisp upward waves should seem to have been splashed with silvery powder added, only, marquise-like glowing youth to her face

The summery light-like fullness of her dress was accentuated by the taut belt with coral-inlaid clasp from that small start the skirts flowed down to dissipate and spread where they touched the floor Tentatively she extended her right hand, which he, without again raising his eyes, shook 'Well Gavin,' she said 'I

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

hope you had a good journey? I am so very glad you could come'

He said 'And my mother sends you her love'

'Does she?' Sitting down, sinking an elbow into the sofa cushions, she added 'How is Edith - how is your mother?'

'Oh, she is very well'

She vaguely glanced round her drawing-room, as though seeing it from his angle, and, therefore, herself seeing it for the first time. The alternatives it offered could be distracting; she soon asked him her first intimate question - 'Where do you think you would like to sit?'

Not that afternoon, nor, indeed, until some way on into this first visit did Gavin distinguish at all sharply between Mrs Nicholson and her life. Not till the knife of love gained sufficient edge could he cut out her figure from its surroundings. Southstone was, for the poor landowner's son, the first glimpse of the enchanted existence of the *rentier*. Everything was effortless, and, to him, consequently, seemed stamped with style. This society gained by smallness it could be comprehended. People here, the company that she kept, commanded everything they desired, were charged with nothing they did not. The expenditure of their incomes - expenditure calculated so long ago and so nicely that it could now seem artless - occupied them. What there was to show for it showed at every turn, though at no turn too much, for it was not too much. Such light, lofty, smooth-running houses were to be found, quite likely, in no capital city. A word to the livery stables brought an imposing carriage to any door in the afternoons one drove, in a little party, to reflect on a Roman ruin or to admire a village church. In the Promenade's glare, at the end of the shaded avenue, parasols passed

THE DEMON LOVER

and repassed in a rhythm of leisure Just inland were the attentive shops There were meetings for good causes in cool drawing-rooms, afternoon concerts in the hotel ballrooms, and there was always the theatre, where applause continued long after Gavin had gone to bed Best of all, there were no poor to be seen

The plan of this part of Southstone (a plateau backed by the downs and overhanging the sea) was masterful Its architecture was ostentatious, fiddling, bulky and mixed Gavin was happy enough to be at an age to admire the one, to be unaware of the other – he was elated, rather than not, by this exhibition of gumcrack size, and bows, bays, balustrades, glazed-in balconies and French-type mansardes not slowly took up their parts in the fairy tale As strongly was he impressed by the strong raying out, from such points as station and theatre, of avenues, each of which crossed, obliquely, just less wide residential roads Lavishness appeared in the public flowers, the municipal seats with their sofa-like curving backs, the flagpoles, cliff grottoes, perspectives of lawn There was a climate here that change from season to season, the roughest Channel gale blowing, could not disturb This town without function fascinated him – outside it, down to the port or into the fishing quarter, ‘old Southstone’, he did not attempt to stray Such tameness might have been found odd in a little boy Mrs Nicholson never thought of it twice

Gavin’s estimation of Southstone – as he understood much later – coincided with that of a dead man When Jimmie Nicholson bought the house for his wife here, Southstone was the high dream of his particular world It was as Lilian’s husband he made the choice alone, he might not have felt capable of this polished leisure His

death left it uncertain whether, even as Lilian's husband, he could have made the grade. The golf course had been his object failing that he was not, perhaps, so badly placed in the cemetery, which was also outside the town. For, for Southstone dividends kept their mystic origin they were as punctual as Divine grace, as unmentioned as children still in wombs. Thickset Jimmie, with his pursuant reek of the City, could have been a distasteful reminder of money's source.

Gavin, like his dead host, beheld Southstone with all the ardour of an outsider. His own family had a touch of the brutishness that comes from any dependence upon land. Mr and Mrs Doddington were constantly in wet clothes, constantly fatigued, constantly depressed. Nothing new appeared in the squire's home, and what was old had acquired a sort of fog from being ignored. An austere, religious idea of their own standing not so much inspired as preyed upon Gavin's parents. Caps touched to them in the village could not console them for the letters they got from their bank. Money for them was like a spring in a marsh, feebly thrusting its way up to be absorbed again any profit forced from the home farm, any rents received for outlying lands went back again into upkeep, rates, gates, hedging, draining, repairs to cottages and renewal of stock. There was nothing, no nothing ever, to show. In the society round them they played no part to which their position did not compel them. They were poor gentry, in fact, at a period when poverty could not be laughed away. Their lot was less enviable than that of any of their employees or tenants, whose faces, naked in their dejection, and voices pitched to complaints they could at least utter, had disconcerted Gavin, since babyhood, at the Hall door.

THE DEMON LOVER

Had the Doddingtons been told that their kind would die out, they would have expressed little more than surprise that such complicated troubles could end so simply

Always towards the end of a stay at Southstone Gavin's senses began to be haunted by the anticipation of going back So much so that to tread the heat-softened asphalt was to feel once more the suck of a sticky lane *Here*, day and night he breathed with ease that was still a subconscious joy the thought of the Midlands made his lungs contract and deaden – such was the old cold air, sequestered by musty baize doors, of the corridors all the way to his room at home

His room *here* was on the second floor, in front, looking on to the avenue It had a frieze of violets knotted along a ribbon as dusk deepened, these turned gradually black Later, a lamp from the avenue cast a tree's shifting shadow on to the ceiling above his bed, and the same light pierced the Swiss skirts of the dressing-table Mrs Nicholson, on the first occasion when she came as far as his door to say good night, deprecated the 'silliness' of this little room Rockham, it seemed, had thought it suitable for his age – she, Rockham, had her quarters on the same floor – Mrs Nicholson, though she did not say so, seemed to feel it to be unsuitable for his sex 'Because I don't suppose,' she said, 'that you really ever *are lonely in the night?*'

Propped upright against his pillows, gripping his glass of milk, he replied 'I am never frightened'

'But, lonely – what makes you lonely, then?'

'I don't know I suppose, thoughts.'

'Oh, but why,' she said, 'don't you like them?'

'When I am here the night seems a sort of waste, and I don't like to think what a waste it is'

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

Mrs Nicholson, who was on her way out to dinner, paused in the act of looping a gauze scarf over her hair and once again round her throat ‘Only tell me,’ she said, ‘that you’re not more lonely, Gavin, because I am going out? Up here, you don’t know if I am in the house or not’

‘I do know’

Perhaps,’ she suggested humbly, ‘you’ll go to sleep? They all say it is right for you, going to bed so early, but I wish it did not make days so short – I must go’

‘The carriage hasn’t come round yet’

‘No, it won’t it hasn’t been ordered It is so lovely this evening, I thought I would like to walk’ She spoke, though, as though the project were spoiled for her she could not help seeing, as much as he did, the unkindness of leaving him with this picture She came even further into the room to adjust her scarf at his mirror, for it was not yet dark ‘Just once, one evening perhaps, you could stay up late Do you think it would matter? I’ll ask Rockham’

Rockham remained the arbiter it was she who was left to exercise anything so nearly harsh as authority In even the affairs of her own house Mrs Nicholson was not heard giving an order what could not be thought to be conjured into existence must be part of the clockwork wound up at the start by Jimmie and showing no sign of beginning to run down yet The dishes that came to table seemed to surprise her as much, and as pleasingly, as they did Gavin Yet the effect she gave was not of idleness but of preoccupation what she did with her days Gavin did not ask himself – when he did ask himself, later, it was too late They continued to take her colour – those days she did nothing with

It was Rockham who worked out the daily programme,

THE DEMON LOVER

devised to keep the little boy out of Madam's way 'Because Madam,' she said, 'is not accustomed to children' It was by Rockham that, every morning, he was taken down to play by the sea the beach, undulations of orange shingle, was fine-combed with breakwaters, against one of which sat Rockham, reading a magazine Now and then she would look up, now and then she would call These relegations to Rockham sent Gavin to angry extremes of infantilism he tried to drape seaweed streamers around her hat, he plagued to have pebbles taken out of his shoe There was a literal feeling of degradation about this descent from the plateau to the cliff's foot From close up, the sea, with its heaving mackerel vacancy, bored him - most of the time he stood with his back to it, shading his eyes and staring up at the heights From right down here, though Southstone could not be seen - any more than objects set back on a high shelf can be seen by somebody standing immediately underneath it - its illusion, its magical artificiality, was to be savoured as from nowhere else Tiny, the flags of the Promenade's edge, the figures leaning along the railings, stood out against a dazzle of sky And he never looked up at these looking down without an interrupted heartbeat - might she not be among them?

The rule was that they, Rockham and Gavin, walked zigzag down by the cliff path, but travelled up in the lift But one day fate made Rockham forget her purse They had therefore to undertake the ascent The path's artful gradients, hand-railed, were broken by flights of steps and by niched seats, upon every one of which Rockham plumped herself down to regain breath The heat of midday, the glare from the flowered cliff beat up Gavin

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

into a sort of fever As though a dropped plummet had struck him between the eyes he looked up, to see Mrs Nicholson's face above him against the blue The face, its colour rendered transparent by the transparent silk of a parasol, was inclined forward he had the experience of seeing straight up into eyes that did not see him Her look was pitched into space she was not only not seeing him, she was seeing nothing She was listening, but not attending, while someone talked

Gavin, gripping the handrail, bracing his spine against it, leaned out backwards over the handrail into the void, in the hopes of intercepting her line of view But in vain He tore off clumps of sea pinks and cast the too-light flowers outwards into the air, but her pupils never once flickered down Despair, the idea that his doom must be never, never to reach her, not only now but ever, gripped him and gripped his limbs as he took the rest of the path — the two more bends and few more steps to the top He clawed his way up the rail, which shook in its socket

The path, when it landed Gavin on to the Promenade, did so some yards from where Mrs Nicholson and her companion, stood Her companion was Admiral Cannon 'Hello, hello' said the Admiral, stepping back to see clear of the parasol 'Where have *you* sprung from?'

'Oh, but Gavin,' exclaimed Mrs Nicholson, also turning, 'why not come up in the lift? I thought you liked it'

'Lift?' said the Admiral 'Lift, at his age? What, has the boy got a dicky heart?'

'No indeed!' she said, and looked at Gavin so proudly that he became the image of health and strength

'In that case,' said the Admiral, 'do him good' There was something, in the main, not unflattering about this

THE DEMON LOVER

co-equal masculine brusqueness Mrs Nicholson looking over the railings, perceived the labouring top of her maid's hat 'It's poor Rockham,' she said, 'that I am thinking about, she hasn't got a heart but she has attacks - How hazy it is!' she said, indicating the horizon with a gloved hand 'It seems to be days since we saw France I don't believe Gavin believes it is really there'

'It is there all right,' said the Admiral, frowning slightly

'Why, Rockham,' she interposed, 'you look hot
Whatever made you walk up on a day like this?'

'Well, I cannot fly, can I, madam, and I overlooked my purse'

'Admiral Concannon says we may all be flying -
What are you waiting for?'

'I was waiting for Master Gavin to come along'

'I don't see why he should, really - which would you rather, Gavin?'

Admiral Concannon's expression did not easily change, and did not change now His features were severely clear cut, his figure was nervy and spare, and he had an air of eating himself - due, possibly, to his retirement His manners of walking, talking and standing, though all to be recognized at a distance, were vehemently impersonal When in anything that could be called repose he usually kept his hands in his pockets - the abrupt extraction of one hand, for the purpose of clicking thumb and finger together, was the nearest thing to a gesture he ever made His voice and step had become familiar, among the few nocturnal sounds of the avenue, some time before Gavin had seen his face, for he escorted Mrs Nicholson home from parties to which she had been wilful enough to walk Looking out one night, after the hall door shut, Gavin had seen the

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

head of a cigarette, immobile, pulsating sharply under the dark trees. The Concannons had settled at Southstone for Mrs Concannon's health's sake their two daughters attended one of the schools.

Liberated into this blue height, Gavin could afford to look down in triumph at the sea by whose edge he had lately stood. But the Admiral said 'Another short turn, perhaps?' – since they were to *be* three, they had better be three in motion. Mrs Nicholson raised her parasol, and the three moved off down the Promenade with the dignified aimlessness of swans. Ahead, the distance dissolved, the asphalt quivered in heat, and she, by walking between her two companions, produced a democracy of masculine trouble into which age did not enter at all. As they passed the bandstand she said to Gavin 'Admiral Concannon has just been saying that there is going to be a war.'

Gavin glanced across at the Admiral, who remained in profile. Unassisted and puzzled, he said 'Why?'

'Why indeed?' she agreed – 'There!' she said to the Admiral. 'It's no good trying to tease me, because I never believe you.' She glanced around her and added 'After all, we live in the present day! History is quite far back, it is sad, of course, but it does seem silly. I never even cared for history at school, I was glad when we came to the end of it.'

'And when, my dear, did you come to the end of history?'

'The year I put up my hair. It had begun to be not so bad from the time we started catching up with the present, and I was glad I had stayed at school long enough to be sure that it had all ended happily. But oh, those unfortunate people in the past! It seems unkind to say

THE DEMON LOVER

so, but can it have been their faults? They can have been no more like us than cats and dogs I suppose there is one reason for learning history – one sees how long it has taken to make the world nice Who on earth could want to upset things now? – No one could want to,’ she said to the Admiral ‘You forget the way we behave now, and there’s no other way Civilized countries are polite to each other, just as you and I are to the people we know, and uncivilized countries are put down – but, if one thinks, there are beautifully few of those Even savages really prefer wearing hats and coats Once people wear hats and coats and can turn on electric light, they would no more want to be silly than you or I do – Or do you want to be silly?’ she said to the Admiral

He said ‘I did not mean to upset you’

‘You don’t,’ she said ‘I should not dream of suspecting *any* civilized country’

‘Which civilized country?’ said Gavin ‘France?’

‘For your information,’ said the Admiral coldly, ‘it is Germany we should be preparing to fight, for the reason that she is preparing to fight us’

‘I have never been happier anywhere,’ said Mrs Nicholson, more nearly definitely than usual ‘Why,’ she added, turning to Gavin, ‘if it were not for Germany, now I come to think of it, you would not be here!’

The Admiral, meanwhile, had become intent on spearing on the tip of his cane a straying fragment of paper, two inches torn off a letter, that was defiling the Promenade Lips compressed, he crossed to a litter basket (which had till then stood empty, there being no litter) and knocked the fragment into it off his cane He burst out ‘I should like to know what this place is coming to – we shall have trippers next!’

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

This concern his beautiful friend *could* share – and did so share that harmony was restored Gavin, left to stare out to sea, reflected on one point in the conversation he could never forget that the Admiral had called Mrs Nicholson, ‘My dear’

Also, under what provocation had the Admiral threatened Mrs Nicholson with war? Back at Gavin’s home again, once more with his parents, nothing was, after all, so impossible this was outside the zone of electric light As late summer wore slowly over the Midlands, the elms in the Doddingtons’ park casting lifeless slate-coloured shadows over sorrel, dung, thistles and tufted grass, it was born in on Gavin that this existence belonged, by its nature, to *any* century It was unprogressive It had stayed as it was while, elsewhere, history jerked itself painfully off the spool, it could hardly be more depressed by the fateful passage of armies than by the flooding of tillage or the failure of crops it was hardly capable, really, of being depressed further It was an existence mortgaged to necessity, it was an inheritance of uneasiness, tension and suspicion One could preassume the enmity of weather, prices, mankind, cattle It was this dead weight of existence that had supplied to history not so much the violence or the futility that had been, as she said, apparent to Mrs Nicholson, but its repetitive harshness and its power to scar This existence had no volition, but could not stop, and its never stopping, because it could not, made history’s ever stopping the less likely No signs of even an agreeable pause were to be seen round Doddington Hall Nor could one, at such a distance from Southstone, agree that time had laboured to make the world nice

Gavin now saw his mother as Mrs Nicholson’s friend

THE DEMON LOVER

Indeed, the best of the gowns in which Edith went out to dinner, when forced to go out to dinner, had been Lilian's once, and once or twice worn by her. Worn by Edith, they still had the exoticism of gifts, and dispelled from their folds not only the giver's sachets but the easy pitiful lovingness of the giver's mood. In them, Gavin's mother's thin figure assumed a grace whose pathos was lost to him at the time. While the brown-yellow upward light of the table oil-lamp unkindly sharpened the hollows in Mrs. Doddington's face and throat, Gavin, thrown sideways out of his bed, fingered the mousseline or caressed the satin of the skirts with an adoring absorption that made his mother uneasy — for fetishism is still to be apprehended by these for whom it has never had any name. She would venture 'You like, then, to see me in pretty clothes?' It was, too, in the first of these intermissions between his visits to Southstone that he, for the first time, took stock of himself, of his assets — the evident pleasingness of his manner, his looks — he could take in better and better part his elder brother's jibes at his pretty-prettiness — his quickness of mind, which at times made even his father smile, and his masculinity, which, now he tried it out, gave him unexpected command of small situations. At home, nights were not a waste he attached himself to his thoughts, which took him, by seven-league strides, onward to his next visit. He rehearsed, using his mother, all sorts of little gratuities of behaviour, till she exclaimed 'Why, Lilian has made quite a little page of you!' At her heels round the garden or damp extensive offices of the Hall, at her elbow as she peered through her letters or resignedly settled to her accounts, he reiterated 'Tell me about Germany.'

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

'Why Germany?"

'I mean, the year you were there'

A gale tore the slates from the Hall stables, brought one tree down on to a fence and another to block the drive, the night before Gavin left for Southstone. This time he travelled alone. At Southstone, dull shingly roaring thumps from the beach travelled as far inland as the railway station, from the Promenade - on which, someone said, it was all but impossible to stand upright - there came a whistling strain down the avenues. It was early January. Rockham was kept to the house by a nasty cold, so it was Mrs Nicholson who, with brilliantly heightened colour, holding her muff to the cheek on which the wind blew, was on the station platform to meet Gavin. A porter, tucking the two of them into the waiting carriage, replaced the foot-warmer under the fur rug. She said 'How different this is from when you were with me last. Or do you like winter?'

'I like anything, really'

'I remember one thing you don't like you said you didn't like thoughts.' As they drove past a lighted house from which music came to be torn about by the wind, she remembered 'You've been invited to several parties.'

He was wary 'Shall you be going to them?'

'Why, yes, I'm sure I *could* go,' she said

Her house was hermetic against the storm in the drawing-room, heat drew out the smell of violets. She dropped her muff on the sofa, and Gavin stroked it - 'It's like a cat,' he said quickly, as she turned round. 'Shall I have a cat?' she said 'Would you like me to have a cat?' All the other rooms, as they went upstairs, were tawny with fires that did not smoke.

THE DEMON LOVER

Next morning, the wind had dropped, the sky reflected on everything its mild brightness, trees, houses, and pavements glistened like washed glass' Rockham, puffy and with a glazed upper lip, said 'Baster Gavid, you've brought us better weather' Having blown her nose with what she seemed to hope was exhaustive thoroughness, she concealed her handkerchief in her bosom as guiltily as though it had been a dagger 'Badam,' she said, 'doesn't like be to have a cold - Poor Bisses Codcaddod,' she added, 'has been laid up agaid'

Mrs Concannon's recovery must be timed for the little dinner party that they were giving Her friends agreed that she ought to reserve her strength On the morning of what was to be the day, it was, therefore, the Admiral whom one met out shopping Gavin and Mrs Nicholson came on him moodily selecting flowers and fruit Delayed late autumn and forced early spring flowers blazed, under artificial light, against the milder daylight outside the florist's plate glass 'For tonight, for the party" exclaimed Mrs Nicholson 'Oh, let us have carnations, scarlet carnations'

The Admiral hesitated 'I think Constance spoke of chrysanthemums, white chrysanthemums'

'Oh, but these are so washy, so like funerals They will do poor Constance no good, if she still feels ill'

Gavin, who had examined the prices closely, in parenthesis said 'Carnations are more expensive'

'No, wait' cried Mrs Nicholson, gathering from their buckets all the scarlet carnations that were in reach, and gaily shaking the water from their stems, 'you must let me send these to Constance, because I am so much looking forward to tonight It will be delightful'

'I hope so,' the Admiral said 'But I'm sorry to say we

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

shall be an uneven number we have just heard that poor Massingham has dropped out Influenza'

'Bachelors shouldn't have influenza, should they - But then, why not ask somebody else?'

'So very much at the last moment, that might seem a bit - informal'

'Dear me,' she teased, 'have you really *no* old friend?'

'Constance does not feel '

Mrs Nicholson's eyebrows rose she looked at the Admiral over the carnations This was one of the moments when the Admiral could be heard to click his finger and thumb 'What a pity,' she said 'I don't care for lopsided parties I have one friend who is not touchy - invite Gavin'

To a suggestion so completely outrageous, who was to think of any reply? It was a *coup* She completed, swiftly 'Tonight, then? We shall be with you at about eight'

Gavin's squiring Mrs Nicholson to the Concannons' party symptomized this phase of their intimacy, without being, necessarily, its highest point Rockham's cold had imperilled Rockham's prestige as intervener or arbiter she could be counted out There being no more talk of these odious drops to the beach, Gavin exercised over Mrs Nicholson's mornings what seemed a conqueror's rights to a terrain, while with regard to her afternoons she showed a flattering indecision as to what might not please him or what he could not share At her tea-table, his position was made subtly manifest to her guests His bed-time was becoming later and later, in vain did Rockham stand and cough in the hall, more than once or twice he had dined downstairs When the curtains were drawn, it was he who lit the piano candles, then stood beside her as she played - ostensibly to turn over

THE DEMON LOVER

the music, but forgetting the score to watch her hands At the same time, he envisaged their two figures as they would appear to someone – his other self – standing out there in the cold dark of the avenue, looking between the curtains into the glowing room One evening, she sang ‘Two Eyes of Grey that used to be so Bright’

At the end, he said ‘But that’s supposed to be a song sung by a man to a woman’

Turning on the stool, she said ‘Then you must learn it’

He objected ‘But your eyes are not grey’

Indeed they were never neutral eyes Their sapphire darkness, with that of the sapphire pendant she was wearing, was struck into by the Concannons’ electric light That round fitment on pulleys, with a red silk frill, had been so adjusted above the dinner table as to cast down a vivid circle, in which the guests sat The stare and sheen of the cloth directly under the light appeared supernatural The centrepiece was a silver or plated pheasant, around whose base the carnations – slightly but strikingly ‘off’ the red of the shade, but pre-eminently flattering in their contrast to Mrs Nicholson’s orchid *glacé* gown – were bunched in four silver cornets This was a party of eight if the Concannons had insisted on stressing its ‘littleness’, it was, still, the largest that they could hope to give The evident choiceness of the guests, the glitter and the mathematical placing of the silver and glass, the prompt, meticulous service of the dishes by maids whose suspended breath could be heard – all, all bespoke art and care Gavin and Mrs Nicholson were so placed as to face one another across the table her glance contained him, from time to time, in its leisurely, not quite attentive play He wondered whether she felt, and supposed she

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

must, how great had been the effrontery of their entrance

For this dinner-party lost all point if it were not *de rigueur*. The Concannon daughters, even (big girls, but with hair still down their backs) had, as not qualified for it, been sent out for the evening. It, the party, had been balanced up and up on itself like a house of cards built, it remained as precarious. Now the structure trembled, down to its base, from one contemptuous flip at its top story — Mrs Nicholson's caprice of bringing a little boy. Gavin perceived that night what he was not to forget the helplessness, in the last resort, of society — which he was never, later, to be able to think of as a force. The pianola-like play of the conversation did not drown the nervousness round the table.

At the head of the table the Admiral leaned just forward, as though pedalling the pianola. At the far end, an irrepressible cough from time to time shook Mrs Concannon's decolttage and the crystal pince-nez which, balanced high on her face, gave her a sensitive blankness. She had the *dévote* air of some sailors' wives, and was heroic in pale blue without a wrap — arguably, nothing could make her iller. The Admiral's pride in his wife's courage passed like a current over the silver pheasant. For Mrs Concannon, joy in sustaining all this for his sake, and confidence in him, provided a light armour she possibly did not feel what was felt for her. To Gavin she could not have been kinder, to Mrs Nicholson she had only and mildly said 'He will not be shy, I hope, if he does not sit beside you?'

Rearrangement of the table at the last moment could not but have disappointed one or other of the two gentlemen who had expected to sit, and were now sitting, at Mrs Nicholson's right and left hand. More and more,

THE DEMON LOVER

as course followed course, these two showed how highly they rated their good fortune — indeed, the censure around the rest of the table only acted for them, like heat drawing out scent, to heighten the headiness of her immediate aura. Like the quick stuff of her dress her delinquency, even, gave out a sort of shimmer while she, neither arch nor indolent, turned from one to the other her look — if you like, melting, for it dissolved her pupils, which had never been so dilated, dark, as tonight. In this look, as dinner proceeded, the two flies, ceasing to struggle, drowned.

The reckoning would be on the way home. Silent between the flies' wives, hypnotized by the rise and fall of Mrs Nicholson's pendant, Gavin ate on and on. The ladies' move to the drawing-room sucked him along with it in the wake of the last skirt. It was without a word that, at the end of the evening, the Admiral saw Mrs Nicholson to her carriage — Gavin, like an afterthought or a monkey, nipping in under his host's arm extended to hold open the carriage door. Light from the porch, as they drove off, fell for a moment longer on that erect form and implacable hatchet face. Mrs Nicholson seemed to be occupied in gathering up her skirts to make room for Gavin. She then leaned back in her corner, and he in his not a word broke the tension of the short dark drive home. Not till she had dropped her cloak in front of her drawing-room fire did she remark ‘The Admiral’s angry with me’.

‘Because of me?’

‘Oh dear no, because of her. If I did not think to be angry was very silly, I’d almost be a little angry with him.’

‘But you meant to make him angry, didn’t you?’ Gavin said.

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

'Only because he's silly,' said Mrs Nicholson 'If he were not so silly, that poor unfortunate creature would stop coughing she would either get better or die' Still standing before her mantelpiece, she studied some freesias in a vase – dispassionately, she pinched off one fading bloom, rolled it into a wax pill between her thumb and finger, then flicked it away to sizzle in the heart of the fire 'If people,' she said, 'give a party for no other reason but to show off their marriage, what kind of evening can one expect? – However, I quite enjoyed myself I hope you did?'

Gavin said 'Mrs Concannon's quite old But then, so's the Admiral '

'He quite soon will be, at this rate,' said Mrs Nicholson 'That's why he's so anxious to have that war One would have thought a man could just be a man – What's the matter, Gavin, what are you staring at?'

'That is your most beautiful dress '

'Yes, that's why I put it on ' Mrs Nicholson sat down on a low blue velvet chair and drew the chair to the fire she shivered slightly 'You say such sweet things, Gavin what fun we have!' Then, as though, within the seconds of silence ticked off over her head by the little Dresden clock, her own words had taken effect with her, she turned and, with an impulsive movement, invited him closer to her side Her arm stayed round him, her short puffed sleeve, disturbed by the movement, rustled down into silence In the fire a coal fell apart, releasing a seam of gas from which spurted a pale tense quivering flame 'Aren't you glad we are back?' she said, 'that we are only you and me? – Oh, why endure such people when all the time there is the whole world! Why do I stay on and on here; what am I doing? Why don't we go

THE DEMON LOVER

right away somewhere, Gavin, you and I? To Germany, or into the sun? Would that make you happy?"

"That — that flame's so funny," he said, not shifting his eyes from it

She dropped her arm and cried, in despair "After all, what a child you are!"

"I am not"

"Anyhow, it's late, you must go to bed"

She transmuted the rise of another shiver into a slight yawn

Overcharged and trembling, he gripped his way, flight by flight, up the polished banister rail, on which his palms left patches of mist, pulling himself away from her up the staircase as he had pulled himself towards her up the face of the cliff

After that midwinter visit there were two changes Mrs Nicholson went abroad, Gavin went to school He overheard his mother say to his father that Lilian found Southstone this winter really too cold to stay in "Or, has made it too hot to stay in?" said Mr Doddington, from whose disapproval the story of Gavin and the Concannons' party had not been able to be kept Edith Doddington coloured, loyal, and said no more During his first term Gavin received at school one bright picture postcard of Mentone The carefully chosen small preparatory school confronted him, after all, with fewer trials than his parents had feared and his brother hoped His protective adaptability worked quickly, he took enough colour, or colourlessness, from where he was to pass among the others, and along with them — a civil and indifferent little boy His improved but never quite certain health got him out of some things and secured others — rests from time to time in the sick-room, teas by

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

the matron's fire This spectacled woman was not quite unlike Rockham, also, she was the most approachable edge of the grown-up ambience that connected him, however remotely, with Mrs Nicholson At school, his assets of feeling remained, one would now say, frozen

His Easter holidays had to be spent at home, his summer holidays exhausted their greater part in the same concession to a supposed attachment Not until September was he dispatched to Southstone, for a week, to be set up before his return to school

That September was an extension of summer An admirable company continued its season of light opera at the theatre, in whose gardens salvias blazed The lawns, shorn to the roots after weeks of mowing, were faintly blond after weeks of heat Visitors were still many, and residents, after the fastidious retreat of August, were returning – along the Promenade, all day long, parasols, boater hats and light dresses flickered against the dense blue gauze backdrop that seldom let France be seen In the evenings the head of the pier was a lighted musical box above the not yet cooling sea Rare was the blade of chill, the too crystal morning or breathlike blur on the distance that announced autumn Down the avenues the dark green trees hardened but did not change if a leaf did fall, it was brushed away before anyone woke

If Rockham remarked that Gavin was now quite a little man, her mistress made no reference to his schoolboy state She did once ask whether the norfolk jacket that had succeeded his sailor blouse were not, in this weather, a little hot, but that he might be expected to be more gruff, mum, standoffish or awkward than formerly did not appear to strike her The change, if any, was in her He failed to connect – why should

THE DEMON LOVER

he? — her new languor, her more marked contrarieties and her odd little periods of askance musing wifl the illness that was to be her death. She only said, the summer had been too long. Until the evenings she and Gavin were less alone, for she rose late, and, on their afternoon drives through the country, inland from the coast or towards the downs, they were as often as not accompanied by, of all persons, Mrs Concannon. On occasions when Mrs Concannon returned to Mrs Nicholson's house for tea, the Admiral made it his practice to call for her. The Concannons were very much occupied with preparations for another social event a Southstone branch of the Awaken Britannia League was to be inaugurated by a drawing-room meeting at their house. The daughters were busy folding and posting leaflets. Mrs Nicholson, so far, could be pinned down to nothing more than a promise to send cakes from her own, or rather her cook's, kitchen.

'But at least,' pleaded Mrs Concannon, at tea one afternoon, 'you should come if only to hear what it is about.'

By five o'clock, in September, Mrs Nicholson's house cast its shadow across the avenue on to the houses opposite, which should otherwise have received the descending sun. In revenge, they cast shadow back through her bow window everything in the drawing-room seemed to exist in copper-mauve glass, or as though reflected into a tarnished mirror. At this hour, Gavin saw the pale walls, the silver lamp stems, the transparent frills of the cushions with a prophetic feeling of their impermanence. At her friend's words, Mrs Nicholson's hand, extended, paused for a moment over the cream jug. Turning her head she said 'But I know what it is about, and I don't approve.'

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

With so little reference to the Admiral were these words spoken that he might not have been there. There, however, he was, standing drawn up above the low tea-table, cup and saucer in hand. For a moment, not speaking, he weighed his cup with a frown that seemed to ponder its exact weight. He then said 'Then, logically, you should not be sending cakes.'

'Lilian,' said Constance Concannon fondly, 'is never logical with regard to her friends.'

'Aren't I?' said Mrs Nicholson - 'But cake, don't you think, makes everything so much nicer? You can't offer people nothing but disagreeable ideas.'

'You are too naughty, Lilian. All the League wants is that we should be alert and thoughtful - Perhaps Gavin would like to come?'

Mrs Nicholson turned on Gavin a considering look from which complicity seemed to be quite absent, she appeared, if anything, to be trying to envisage him as alert and thoughtful. And the Admiral, at the same moment, fixed the candidate with a measuring eye. 'What may come,' he said, 'is bound, before it is done, to be his affair.' Gavin made no reply to the proposition - and it was found, a minute or two later, that the day fixed for the drawing-room meeting was the day fixed for his return home. School began again after that. 'Well, what a pity,' Mrs Concannon said.

The day approached. The evenings were wholly theirs, for Mrs Nicholson dined out less. Always, from after tea, when any guests had gone, he began to reign. The apartnesses and frustrations of the preceding hours, and, most of all, the occasional dissonances that those could but produce between him and her, sent him pitching towards the twilight in a fever that rose as the week went

THE DEMON LOVER

on This fever, every time, was confounded by the sweet pointlessness of the actual hour when it came. The warmth that lingered in the exhausted daylight made it possible for Mrs Nicholson to extend herself on the *chaise longue* in the bow window Seated on a stool at the foot of the *chaise longue*, leaning back against the frame of the window, Gavin could see, through the side pane of the glass projection in which they sat, the salbias smouldering in the theatre gardens As it was towards these that her chair faced, in looking at them he was looking away from her On the other hand, they were looking at the same thing So they were on the evening that was his last At the end of a minute or two of silence she exclaimed 'No, I don't care, really, for scarlet flowers — You do?'

'Except carnations?'

'I don't care for public flowers And you look and look at them till I feel quite lonely'

'I was only thinking, *they* will be here tomorrow '

'Have you been happy this time, Gavin? I haven't sometimes thought you've been quite so happy Has it been my fault?'

He turned, but only to finger the fringe of the Kashmir shawl that had been spread by Rockham across her feet Not looking up, he said 'I have not seen you so much '

'There are times,' she said, 'when one seems to be at the other side of glass One sees what is going on, but one cannot help it It may be what one does not like, but one cannot feel '

'Here, I always feel '

'Always feel what?' she remotely and idly asked

'I just mean, here, I feel I don't feel, anywhere else '

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

'And what is "here"?' she said, with tender mocking obtuseness 'Southstone? What do you mean by "here"?'

'Near you'

Mrs Nicholson's attitude, her repose, had not been come at carelessly. Apparently relaxed, but not supine, she was supported by six or seven cushions - behind her head, at the nape of her neck, between her shoulders, under her elbows and in the small of her back. The slipperiness of this architecture of comfort enjoined stillness - her repose depended on each cushion staying just where it was. Up to now, she had lain with her wrists crossed on her dress a random turn of the wrist, or flexing of fingers, were the nearest things to gestures she permitted herself - and, indeed, these had been enough. Now, her beginning to say, 'I wonder if they were right' must, though it sounded nothing more than reflective, have been accompanied by an incautious movement, for a cushion fell with a plump to the ground. Gavin went round, recovered the cushion and stood beside her. They eyed one another with communicative amazement, as though a third person had spoken and they were uncertain if they had heard aright. She arched her waist up and Gavin replaced the cushion. He said 'If who were right?'

'Rockham. The Admiral. She's always hinting, he's always saying, that I'm in some way thoughtless and wrong with you.'

'Oh, hum'

'I know,' she said. 'But you'll say goodbye to him nicely?'

He shrugged. 'I shan't see him again - this time.'

She hesitated. She was about to bring out something that, though slight, must be unacceptable. 'He is

THE DEMON LOVER

coming in,' she said, 'for a moment, just after dinner, to fetch the cakes'

'Which cakes?'

'The cakes for tomorrow I had arranged to send them round in the morning, but that would not do, no, that would not be soon enough. Everything is for the Admiral's meeting to make us ready, so everything must be ready in good time'

When, at nine o'clock, the Admiral's ring was heard, Mrs Nicholson, indecisively, put down her coffee cup. A wood fire, lit while they were at dinner, was blazing languidly in the already warm air. It was necessary to sit at a distance from it. While the bell still rang, Gavin rose, as though he had forgotten something, and left the drawing-room. Passing the maid on her way to open the front door, he made a bolt upstairs. In his bedroom, Rockham was in possession. His trunk waited, open, bottom layer packed, her mending-basket was on the bureau, she was taking a final look through his things - his departure was to be early tomorrow morning. 'Time flies,' she said. 'You're no sooner come than you're gone.' She continued to count handkerchiefs, to stack up shirts. 'I'd have thought,' she said, 'you'd have wanted to bring your school cap.'

'Why? Anyway, it's a silly beastly old colour.'

'You're too old-fashioned,' she said sharply. 'It was high time somebody went to school - Now you *have* come up, just run down again, there's a good boy, and ask Madam if there's anything for your mother. If it's books, they ought to go in here among your boots.'

'The Admiral's there'

'Well, my goodness, you know the Admiral'

Gavin played for time, on the way down, by looking

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

into the rooms on every floor Their still only partial familiarity, their fullness with objects that, in the half light coming in from the landing, he could only half perceive and did not yet dare touch, made him feel he was still only at the first chapter of the mystery of the house He wondered how long it would be before he saw them again Fear of Rockham's impatience, of her calling down to ask what he was up to, made him tread cautiously on the thickly carpeted stairs, he gained the hall without having made a sound Here he smelled the fresh-baked cakes, waiting in a hamper on the hall table The drawing-room door stood ajar, on, for a minute, dead silence The Admiral must have gone, without the cakes

But then the Admiral spoke 'You must see, there is nothing more to be said I am only sorry I came I did not expect you to be alone '

'For once, that is not my fault,' replied Mrs Nicholson, unsteadily 'I do not even know where the child is' In a voice that hardly seemed to be hers she cried out softly 'Then this is to go on always? What more do you ask? What else am I to be or do?'

'There's nothing more you can do And all you must be is, happy '

'How easy,' Mrs Nicholson said

'You have always said that that was easy, for you For my own part, I have never considered happiness There you misunderstood me, quite from the first '

'Not quite Was I wrong in thinking you were a man?'
'I'm a man, yes. But I'm not that sort '

'That is too subtle for me,' said Mrs Nicholson.

'On the contrary, it is too simple for you You ignore the greater part of my life You cannot be blamed,

THE DEMON LOVER

perhaps, you have only known me since I was cursed with too much time on my hands Your — your looks, charm and gaiety, my dear Lilian, I'd have been a fool not to salute at their full worth Beyond that, I'm not such a fool as I may have seemed Fool? — all things considered, I could not have been simply that without being something a good deal viler'

'I have been nice to Constance,' said Mrs Nicholson

'Vile in my own eyes'

'I know, that is all you think of'

'I see, now, where you are in your element You know as well as I do what your element is, which is why there's nothing more to be said Flirtation's always been off my beat — so far off my beat, as a matter of fact, that I didn't know what it was when I first saw it There, no doubt, I was wrong If you can't live without it, you cannot, and that is that If you have to be dangled after, you no doubt will be But don't, my dear girl, go for that to the wrong shop It would have been enough, where I am concerned, to watch you making a nannie of that unfortunate boy'

'Who, poor little funny Gavin?' said Mrs Nicholson
'Must I have nothing? — I have no little dog You would not like it, even, if I had a real little dog And you expect me to think that you do not care'

The two voices, which intensity more than caution kept pitched low, ceased Gavin pushed open the drawing-room door

The room, as can happen, had elongated Like figures at the end of a telescope the Admiral and Mrs Nicholson were to be seen standing before the fire Of this, not a glint had room to appear between the figures of the antagonists Mrs Nicholson, head bent as though to

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

examine the setting of the diamond, was twisting round a ring on her raised left hand — a lace-edged handkerchief, like an abandoned piece of stage property, had been dropped and lay on the hearthrug near the hem of her skirts. She gave the impression of having not moved if they had not, throughout, been speaking from this distance, the Admiral must have taken a step forward. But this, on his part, must have been, and must be, all — his head was averted from her, his shoulders were braced back, and behind his back he imprisoned one of his own wrists in a handcuff grip that shifted only to tighten. The heat from the fire must have made necessary, probably for the Admiral when he came, the opening of a window behind the curtains, for, as Gavin advanced into the drawing-room, a burst of applause entered from the theatre, and continued, drowning the music which had begun again.

Not a tremor recorded the moment when Mrs Nicholson knew Gavin was in the room. Obliquely and vaguely turning her bowed head she extended to him, in an unchanged look, what might have been no more than an invitation to listen, also, to the music ‘Why, Gavin,’ she said at last, ‘we were wondering where you were’

Here he was. From outside the theatre, stink still travelled to him from the lorry whose engine was being run. Nothing had changed in the colourless afternoon. Without knowing, he had plucked a leaf of the ivy which now bred and fed upon her house. A soldier, passing behind him to join the others, must have noticed his immobility all the way down the avenue, for the soldier said, out of the side of his mouth ‘Annie doesn’t live here any more.’ Gavin Doddington, humiliated, affected

THE DEMON LOVER

to study the ivy leaf, whose veins were like arbitrary vulgar fate-lines He thought he remembered hearing of metal ivy, he knew he had seen ivy carved round marble monuments to signify fidelity, regret, or the tomb-defying tenaciousness of memory – what you liked Watched by the soldiers, he did not care to make the gesture involving the throwing away of the leaf instead, he shut his hand on it, as he turned from the house Should he go straight to the station, straight back to London? Not while the impression remained so strong On the other hand, it would be a long time before the bars opened

Another walk round Southstone, this afternoon, was necessary there must be a decrescendo From his tour of annihilation, nothing out of the story was to be missed He walked as though he were carrying a guide-book

Once or twice he caught sight of the immune downs, on the ascent to whose contours war had halted the villas The most open view was, still, from the gates of the cemetery, past which he and she had so often driven without a thought Through those gates, the extended dulling white marble vista said to him, only, that the multiplicity of the new graves, in thirty years, was enough in itself to make the position of hers indifferent – she might, once more, be lying beside her husband On the return through the town towards the lip of the plateau overhanging the sea, the voidness and the air of concluded meaning about the plan of Southstone seemed to confirm her theory history, after this last galvanized movement forward, had come, as she expected, to a full stop It had only not stopped where or as she foresaw Crossing the Promenade obliquely, he made, between wire entanglements, for the railings, to become one more of the spaced-out people who leaned

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

along them, willing to see a convoy or gazing with indifference towards liberated France The path and steps up the cliff face had been destroyed, the handrail hung out rotting into the air

Back in the shopping centre, he turned a quickening step, past the shuttered, boarded or concave windows, towards the corner florist's where Mrs Nicholson had insisted on the carnations But this had received a direct hit the entire corner was gone When time takes our revenges out of our hands it is, usually, to execute them more slowly her vindictiveness, more thorough than ours, might satisfy us, if, in the course of her slowness, we did not forget In this case, however, she had worked in the less than a second of detonation Gavin Doddington paused where there was no florist – was he not, none the less, entitled to draw a line through this?

Not until after some time back in the bar did it strike him – there had been one omission He had not yet been to the Concannons' He pushed his way out it was about seven o'clock, twenty minutes or so before the black-out They had lived in a crescent set just back from a less expensive reach of the Promenade On his way, he passed houses and former hotels occupied by soldiers or A T S who had not yet gone These, from top to basement, were in a state of naked, hard, lemon-yellow illumination Interposing dark hulks gave you the feeling of nothing more than their recent military occupation The front doors of the Concannons' crescent opened, on the inland side, into a curved street, which, for some military reason now probably out of date, had been blocked at the near end Gavin had to go round Along the pavements under the front doorsteps there was so much wire that he was thrust out into the road – opposite only one house was

THE DFMON LOVER

there an inviting gap in the loops Admiral Concannon, having died in the last war, could not have obtained this as a concession – all the same this *was*, as the number faintly confirmed, his house Nobody now but Gavin recognized its identity or its importance Here had dwelled, and here continued to dwell, the genius of the Southstone that now was Twice over had there been realized the Admiral's alternative to love

The Concannons' dining-room window, with its high triple sashes, was raised some distance above the street Gavin, standing opposite it, looked in at an A T S girl seated at a table She faced the window, the dusk and him From above her head, a naked electric light bulb, on a flex shortened by being knotted, glared on the stripped, whitish walls of the room and emphasized the fact that she was alone In her khaki shirt, sleeves rolled up, she sat leaning her bare elbows on the bare table Her face was abrupt with youth She turned one wrist, glanced at the watch on it, then resumed her steady stare through the window, downwards at the dusk in which Gavin stood

It was thus that, for the second time in his life, he saw straight up into the eyes that did not see him The intervening years had given him words for trouble a phrase, '*l'horreur de mon néant*', darted across his mind

At any minute, the girl would have to approach the window to do the black-out – for that, along this coast, was still strictly enforced It was worth waiting He lighted a cigarette she looked at her watch again When she did rise it was, first, to unhook from a peg beside the dining-room door not only her tunic but her cap Her being dressed for the street, when she did reach up and, with a succession of movements he liked to watch, begin

IVY GRIPPED THE STEPS

to twitch the black stuff across the window, made it his object *not* to be seen — just yet Light staggered, a moment longer, on the desiccated pods of the wall-flowers that, seeded from the front garden, had sprung up between the cracks of the pavement, and on the continuous regular loops or hoops of barbed wire, through all of which, by a sufficiently long leap, one could have projected oneself head foremost, unhurt At last she had stopped the last crack of light She had now nothing to do but to come out

Coming smartly down the Concannons' steps, she may just have seen the outline of the civilian waiting, smoking a cigarette She swerved impassively, if at all He said 'A penny for your thoughts' She might not have heard He fell into step beside her Next, appearing to hear what he had not said, she replied 'No, I'm *not* going your way'

'Too bad But there's only one way out — can't get out, you know, at the other end What have *I* got to do, then — stay here all night?'

'I don't know, I'm sure' Unconcernedly humming, she did not even quicken her light but ringing tramp on the curved street If he kept abreast with her, it was casually, and at an unpressing distance this, and the widening sky that announced the open end of the crescent, must have been reassuring He called across to her 'That house you came out of, I used to know people who lived there I was just looking round'

She turned, for the first time — she could not help it 'People lved there?' she said 'Just fancy I know I'd sooner live in a tomb And that goes for all this place Imagine anyone coming here on a holiday!'

'I'm on a holiday'

THE DEMON LOVER

'Goodness What do you do with yourself?'

'Just look round '

'Well, I wonder how long you stick it out - Here's where we go different ways Good night '

'I've got nobody to talk to,' Gavin said, suddenly standing still in the dark A leaf fluttered past She was woman enough to halt, to listen, because this had not been said to her If her 'Oh yes, we girls have heard that before' was automatic, it was, still more, wavering He cast away the end of one cigarette and started lighting another the flame of the lighter, cupped inside his hands, jumped for a moment over his features Her first thought was yes, he's quite old - that went along with his desperate jauntiness Civilian, yes too young for the last war, too old for this A gentleman - they were the clever ones But he had, she perceived, forgotten about her thoughts - what she saw, in that moment before he snapped down the lighter, stayed on the darkness, puzzling her somewhere outside the compass of her own youth She had seen the face of somebody dead who was still there - 'old' because of the presence, under an icy screen, of a whole stopped mechanism for feeling Those features had been framed, long ago, for hope The dints above the nostrils, the lines extending the eyes, the lips' grimacing grip on the cigarette - all completed the picture of someone wolfish A preyer But who had said, preyers are preyed upon?

His lower lip came out, thrusting the cigarette up at a debonair angle towards his eyes 'Not a soul,' he added - this time with calculation, and to her

'Anyway,' she said sharply, 'I've got a date Anyway, what made you pick on this dead place? Why not pick on some place where you know someone?'

PINK MAY

‘YES, it was funny,’ she said, ‘about the ghost. It used to come into my bedroom when I was dressing for dinner – when I was dressing to go out.’

‘*You were frightened?*’

‘I was in such a hurry, there never was any time when you have to get dressed in such a hell of a hurry any extra thing is just one thing more. And the room at the times I’m talking about used to be full of daylight – sunset. It had two french windows, and they were on a level with the tops of may trees out in the square. Then may was in flower that month, and it was pink. In that sticky sunshine you have in the evenings the may looked sort of theatrical. It used to be part of my feeling of going out.’ She paused, then said, ‘That was the month of my life.’

‘*What month?*’

‘The month we were in that house. I told you, it was a furnished house that we took. With rents the way they are now, it cost less than a flat. They say a house is more trouble, but this was no trouble, because we treated it like a flat, you see. I mean, we were practically never in. I didn’t try for a servant because I know there aren’t any. When Neville got up in the mornings he percolated the coffee, a char came in to do cleaning when I’d left for the depot, and we fixed with the caretaker next door to

THE DEMON LOVER

look after the boiler, so the baths were hot And the beds were comfortable, too The people who really lived there did themselves well '

'You never met them?'

'No, never - why should we? We'd fixed everything through an agent, the way one does I've an idea the man was soldiering somewhere, and she'd gone off to be near him somewhere in the country They can't have had any children, any more than we have - it was one of those small houses, just for two '

'Pretty?'

'Y-yes,' she said 'It was chintzy It was one of those oldish houses made over new inside But you know how it is about other people's belongings - you can't ever quite use them, and they seem to watch you the whole time Not that there was any question of settling down - how could we, when we were both out all day? And at the beginning of June we moved out again '

'Because of the

'Oh no,' she said quickly 'Not that reason, at all' She lighted a cigarette, took two puffs and appeared to deliberate 'But what I'm telling you *now* is about the ghost '

'Go on'

'I was going on As I say, it used to be funny, dressing away at top speed at the top of an empty house, with the sunset blazing away outside It seems to me that all those evenings were fine I used to take taxis back from the depot you must pay money these days if you want time, and a bath and a change from the skin up was essential - you don't know how one feels after packing parcels all day! I couldn't do like some of the girls I worked with and go straight from the depot on to a date I can't go

PINK MAY

and meet someone unless I'm feeling special So I used to have home Neville was never in'

'I'd been going to say'

'No, Neville worked till all hours, or at least he had to hang round in case something else should come in So he used to dine at his club on the way back Most of the food would be off by the time he got there It was partly that made him nervy, I dare say'

'But you weren't nervy?'

'I tell you,' she said, 'I was happy Madly happy – perhaps in rather a nervy way Whatever you are these days, you are rather more so That's one thing I've discovered about this war'

'You were happy'

'I had my reasons – which don't come into the story.'

After two or three minutes of rapid smoking she leaned forward to stub out her cigarette 'Where was I?' she said, in a different tone

'Dressing'

'Well, first thing when I got in I always went across and opened my bedroom windows, because it seemed to me the room smelled of the char So I always did that before I turned on my bath The glare on the trees used to make me blink, and the thick sort of throaty smell of the may came in I was never certain if I liked it or not, but it somehow made me feel like after a drink Whatever happens tomorrow, I've got tonight You know the feeling? Then I turned on my bath The bathroom was the other room on that floor, and a door led through to it from one side of the bed I used to have my bath with that door ajar, to let light in The bathroom black-out took so long to undo

'While the bath ran in I used to potter about and

begin to put out what I meant to wear, and cold-cream off my old make-up, and so on I say "potter" because you cannot hurry a bath I also don't mind telling you that I whistled Well, what's the harm in *somebody's* being happy? Simply thinking things over won't win this war Looking back at that month, I whistled most of the time The way they used to look at me, at the depot! The queer thing is, though, I remember whistling but I can't remember when I happened to stop But I must have stopped, because it was then I heard '

'*Heard?*'

She lit up again, with a slight frown 'What was it I heard first, that first time? I suppose, the silence "So I must have stopped whistling, mustn't I? I was lying there in my bath, with the door open behind me, when the silence suddenly made me sit right up Then I said to myself, "My girl, there's nothing queer about *that* What else would you expect to hear, in an empty house?"' All the same, it made me heave the other way round in my bath, in order to keep one eye on the door After a minute I heard what wasn't a silence - which immediately made me think that Neville had come in early, and I don't mind telling you I said "Damn" '

'*Oh?*'

'It's a bore being asked where one is going, though it's no bother to say where one has been If Neville *was* in he'd be certain to search the house, so I put a good face on things and yelled "Hoi" But he didn't answer, because it wasn't him'

'*?*'

'No, it wasn't And whatever was in my bedroom must have been in my bedroom for some time I thought, "A wind has come up and got into that damned

chintz!" Any draught always fidgets me, somehow it gets me down So I got out of my bath and wrapped the big towel round me and went through to shut the windows in my room But I was surprised when I caught sight of the may trees - all their branches were standing perfectly still That seemed queer At the same time, the door I'd come through from the bathroom blew shut, and the lid fell off one of my jars of face cream on to the dressing-table, which had a glass top

'No, I didn't see what it was The point was, whatever it was saw me

'That first time, the whole thing was so slight If it had been only that one evening, I dare say I shouldn't have thought of it again Things only get a hold on you when they go on happening But I always have been funny in one way - I especially don't like being watched You might not think so from my demeanour, but I don't really like being criticized I don't think I get my knife into other people why should they get their knife into me? I don't like it when my ear begins to burn

'I went to put the lid back on the jar of cream and switch the lights on into the mirror, which being between the two windows never got the sort of light you would want I thought I looked odd in the mirror - rattled I said to myself, "Now what have I done to *someone*?" but except for Neville I literally couldn't think Anyway, there was no time - when I picked up my wrist-watch I said, "God!" So I flew round, dressing Or rather, I flew round as much as one could with something or somebody getting in the way That's all I remember about that *first* time, I think Oh yes, I did notice that the veil on my white hat wasn't all that it ought to be When I had put that hat out before my

THE DEMON LOVER

bath the whole affair had looked as crisp as a marguerite – a marguerite that has only opened today

‘You know how it is when a good deal hangs on an evening – you simply can’t afford to be not in form So I gave myself a good shake on the way downstairs “Snap out of that!” I said “You’ve got personality You can carry a speck or two on the veil”

‘Once I got to the restaurant – once I’d met him – the whole thing went out of my mind I was in twice as good form as I’d ever been And the turn events took

‘It was about a week later that I had to face it I was up against something The more the rest of my life got better and better, the more that one time of each evening got worse and worse Or rather, it wanted to But I wasn’t going to let it With everything else quite perfect – well, would *you* have? There’s something exciting, I mean, some sort of a challenge about knowing someone’s *trying* to get you down And when that someone’s another woman you soon get a line on her technique She was jealous, that was what was the matter with her

‘Because, at all other times the room was simply a room There wasn’t any objection to me and Neville When I used to slip home he was always asleep I could switch all the lights on and kick my shoes off and open and shut the cupboards – he lay like the dead He *was* abnormally done in, I suppose And the room was simply a room in somebody else’s house And the mornings, when he used to roll out of bed and slip-slop down to make the coffee, without speaking, exactly like someone walking in his sleep, the room was no more than a room in which you’ve just woken up The

PINK MAY

may outside looked pink-pearl in the early sunshine, and there were some regular birds who sang Nice While I waited for Neville to bring the coffee I used to like to lie there and think my thoughts

'If he was awake at all before he had left the house, he and I exchanged a few perfectly friendly words I had no feeling of anything blowing up If I let him form the impression that I'd been spending the evenings at movies with girl friends I'd begun to make at the depot, then going back to their flats to mix Ovaltine - well, that seemed to me the considerate thing to do If he'd even been more *interested* in my life - but he wasn't interested in anything but his work I never picked on him about that - I must say, I do know when a war's a war Only men are so different You see, this other man worked just as hard but *was* interested in me He said he found me so restful Neville never said that In fact, all the month we were in that house, I can't remember anything Neville said at all

'No, what *she* couldn't bear was my going out, like I did She was either a puritan, with some chip on her shoulder, or else she'd once taken a knock I incline to that last idea - though I can't say why

'No, I can't say why I have never at all been a subtle person I don't know whether that's a pity or not I must say I don't care for subtle people - my instinct would be to give a person like that a miss And on the whole I should say I'd succeeded in doing so But that, you see, was where her advantage came in You can't give a well, I couldn't give *her* a miss She was there And she aimed at encircling me.

'I think maybe she had a poltergeist that she brought along with her The little things that happened to my

THE DEMON LOVER

belongings Each evening I dressed in that room I lost five minutes – I mean, each evening it took me five minutes longer to dress But all that was really below her plane That was just one start at getting me down before she opened up with her real technique The really subtle thing was the way her attitude changed That first time (as I've told you) I felt her disliking me – well, really “dislike” was to put it mildly But after an evening or two she was through with that She conveyed the impression that she had got me taped and was simply so damned sorry for me She was sorry about every garment I put on, and my hats were more than she was able to bear She was sorry about the way I did up my face – she used to be right at my elbow when I got out my make-up, absolutely silent with despair She was sorry I should never again see thirty, and sorry I should kid myself about that I mean to say, she started pitying me

‘Do you see what I mean when I say her attitude could have been quite infectious?’

‘And that wasn’t all she was sorry for me about I mean, there are certain things that a woman who’s being happy keeps putting out of her mind (I mean, when she’s being happy about a man) And other things you keep putting out of your mind if your husband is *not* the man you are being happy about There’s a certain amount you don’t ask yourself, and a certain amount that you might as well not remember Now those were exactly the things she kept bringing up She liked to bring those up better than anything

‘What I don’t know is, and what I still don’t know – *why* do all that to a person who’s being happy? To a person who’s living the top month of her life, with the

PINK MAY

may in flower and everything? What had I ever done to her? 'She was dead - I suppose?' Yes, I see now, she must have taken a knock '

'What makes you think that?'

'I know now how a knock feels'

'Oh "'

'Don't look at me such a funny way I haven't changed, have I? You wouldn't have noticed anything?'

I expect it's simply this time of year August's rather a tiring month And things end without warning, before you know where you are I hope the war will be over by next spring, I do want to be abroad, if I'm able to Somewhere where there's nothing but pines or palms I don't want to see London pink may in flower again - ever '

'Won't Neville

'Neville? Oh, didn't you really realize? Didn't I He, I, we've - I mean, we're living apart' She rose and took the full, fuming ash-tray across to another table, and hesitated, then brought an empty tray back 'Since we left that house,' she said 'I told you we left that house That was why We broke up

'It was the other thing that went wrong,' she said 'If I'd still kept my head with Neville, he and I needn't ever - I mean, one's marriage is something I'd thought I'd always be married, whatever else happened I ought to have realized Neville was in a nervy state Like a fool I spilled over to Neville, I lost my head. But by that time I hadn't any control left When the one thing you've lived for has crashed to bits

'Crashed was the word And yet I see now, really, that things had been weakening for some time At the time I didn't see, any more than I noticed the may was fading

THE DEMON LOVER

out in the square — till one morning the weather changed and I noticed the may was brown All the happiness stopped like my stopping whistling — but at what particular moment I'm never sure

'The beginnings of the end of it were so small Like my being a bit more unpunctual every evening we met That made us keep losing our table at restaurants — you know how the restaurants are these days Then I somehow got the idea that none of my clothes were becoming, I began to think he was eyeing my hats unkindly, and that made me fidget and look my worst Then I got an idiot thing about any girl that he spoke of — I didn't like anyone being younger than me Then, at what had once been our most perfect moments, I began to ask myself if I *was* really happy, till I said to him — which was fatal — "Is there so much in this?" I should have seen more red lights — when, for instance, he said, "You know, *you're* getting nervy" And he quite often used to say "Tired?" in rather a tired way I used to say, it was just getting dressed in a rush But the fact is, a man hates the idea of a woman rushing One night I know I did crack I said, "Hell, I've got a ghost in my room!" He put me straight into a taxi and sent me — not took me — home

'I did see him several times after that So his letter — his letter was a complete surprise The joke was, I really had been out with a girl that evening I came in, late, to find his letter

'If Neville had not been there when I got the letter, Neville and I might still — I suppose — be married On the other hand — there are always two ways to see things — if Neville had *not* been there I should have gone mad

"So now," she said, with a change of tone, 'I'm living

PINK MAY

in an hotel Till I see how things turn out Till the war is over, or something It isn't really so bad, and I'm out all day •Look, I'll give you my address and telephone number It's been wonderful seeing you, darling You promise we'll meet again? I do really need to keep in touch with my friends And you don't so often meet someone who's seen a ghost!

'But look, did you ever see it?'

'Well, not exactly No, I can't say I saw it '

'You mean, you simply heard it?'

'Well, not exactly that '

'You saw things move?'

'Well, I never turned round in time I

'If you don't understand - I'm sorry I ever told you the story! Not a ghost - when it ruined my whole life! Don't you see, can't you see there must have been something? Left to oneself, one doesn't ruin one's life!'

G R E E N H O L L Y

M R R A N K S T O C K entered the room with a dragging tread nobody looked up or took any notice With a muted groan, he dropped into an armchair – out of which he shot with a sharp yelp He searched the seat of the chair, and extracted something ‘*Your holly, I think, Miss Bates,*’ he said, holding it out to her

Miss Bates took a second or two to look up from her magazine ‘What?’ she said ‘Oh, it must have fallen down from that picture Put it back, please, we haven’t got very much’

‘I regret,’ interposed Mr Winterslow, ‘that we have any it makes scratchy noises against the walls’

‘It is seasonable,’ said Miss Bates firmly

‘You didn’t do this to us last Christmas’

‘Last Christmas,’ she said, ‘I had Christmas leave This year there seems to be none with berries the birds have eaten them If there were not a draught, the leaves would not scratch the walls I cannot control the forces of nature, can I?’

‘How should I know?’ said Mr Rankstock, lighting his pipe

These three by now felt that, like Chevalier and his Old Dutch, they had been together for forty years and to them it did seem a year too much Actually, their confinement dated from 1940 They were Experts – in

GREEN HOLLY

what, the Censor would not permit me to say They were accounted for by their friends in London as 'being somewhere off in the country, nobody knows where, doing something frightfully hush-hush, nobody knows what' That is, they were accounted for in this manner if there were still anybody who still cared to ask, but on the whole they had dropped out of human memory Their reappearances in their former circles were infrequent, ghostly and unsuccessful their friends could hardly disguise their pity, and for their own part they had not a word to say They had come to prefer to spend leaves with their families, who at least showed a flattering pleasure in their importance

This Christmas, it so worked out that there was no question of leave for Mr Rankstock, Mr Winterslow or Miss Bates with four others (now playing or watching pingpong in the next room) they composed in their high-grade way a skeleton staff It may be wondered why, after years of proximity, they should continue to address one another so formally They did not continue, they had begun again, in the matter of appellations, as in that of intimacy, they had by now, in fact by some time ago, completed the full circle For some months, they could not recall in which year, Miss Bates had been engaged to Mr Winterslow, before that, she had been extremely friendly with Mr Rankstock Mr Rankstock's deviation towards one Carla (now at her pingpong in the next room) had been totally uninteresting to everybody, including, apparently, himself If the war lasted, Carla might next year be called Miss Tongue, at present, Miss Bates was foremost in keeping her in her place by going on addressing her by her Christian name

THE DEMON LOVER

If this felt like their fortieth Christmas in each other's society, it was their first in these particular quarters You would not have thought, as Mr. Rankstock said, that one country house could be much worse than any other, but this had proved, and was still proving, untrue The Army, for reasons it failed to justify, wanted the house they had been in since 1940, so they – lock, stock and barrel and files and all – had been bundled into another one, six miles away Since the move, tentative exploration (for they were none of them walkers) had established that they were now surrounded by rather more mud but fewer trees What they did know was, their already sufficient distance from the market town with its bars and movies had now been added to by six miles On the other side of their new home, which was called Mopsam Grange, there appeared to be nothing, unless, as Miss Bates suggested, swineherds, keeping their swine Mopsam village contained villagers, evacuees, a church, a public-house on whose never-open door was chalked 'No Beer, No Matches, No Teas Served', and a vicar The vicar had sent up a nice note, saying he was not clear whether Security regulations would allow him to call, and the doctor had been up once to lance one of Carla's boils

Mopsam Grange was neither old nor new It replaced – unnecessarily, they all felt – a house on this site that had been burned down It had a Gothic porch and gables, french windows, bow windows, a conservatory, a veranda, a hall which, puce-and-buff tiled and pitch-pine-panelled, rose to a gallery in fact, every advantage Jackdaws fidgeted in its many chimneys – for it had, till the war, stood empty one had not to ask why The hot-water system made what Carla called rude noises, and was

GREEN HOLLY

capricious in its supplies to the (only) two mahogany-rimmed baths. The electric light ran from a plant in the yard, if the batteries were not kept charged the light turned brown.

The three now sat in the drawing-room, on whose walls, mirrors and fitments, long since removed, left traces. There were, however, some pictures General Montgomery (who had just shed his holly) and some Landseer engravings that had been found in an attic. Three electric bulbs, naked, shed light manfully, and in the grate the coal fire was doing far from badly. Miss Bates rose and stood twiddling the bit of holly. 'Something,' she said, 'has got to be done about this.' Mr Winterslow and Mr Rankstock, the latter sucking in his pipe, sank lower, between their shoulder-blades, in their respective armchairs. Miss Bates, having drawn a breath, took a running jump at a table, which she propelled across the floor with a grating sound '*Achtung!*' she shouted at Mr Rankstock, who, with an oath, withdrew his chair from her route. Having got the table under General Montgomery, Miss Bates - with a display of long, slender leg, clad in ribbed scarlet sports stockings, that was of interest to no one - mounted it, then proceeded to tuck the holly back into position over the General's frame. Meanwhile, Mr Winterslow, choosing his moment, stealthily reached across her empty chair and possessed himself of her magazine.

What a hope! - Miss Bates was known to have eyes all the way down her spine. 'Damn you, Mr Winterslow,' she said, 'put that down! Mr Rankstock, interfere with Mr Winterslow! Mr Winterslow has taken my magazine!' She ran up and down the table like something in a cage, Mr Rankstock removed his pipe from his mouth,

THE DEMON LOVER

dropped his head back, gazed up and said ‘Gad, Miss Bates, you look fine ’

‘It’s a pretty *old* magazine,’ murmured Mr Winter-slow flicking the pages over

‘Well, *you’re* pretty old,’ she said ‘I hope Carla gets you!’

‘Oh, I can do better, thank you, I’ve got a ghost ’

This confidence, however, was cut off by Mr Rankstock’s having burst into song Holding his pipe at arm’s length, rocking on his bottom in his armchair, he led them

‘ “Heigh-ho! sing Heigh-ho! unto the green holly .

Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly – ” ’

‘ “*Mere folly, mere folly,*” ’ contributed Mr Winter slow, picking up, joining in Both sang

‘ “*Then, heigh ho, the holly!*
This life is most jolly ” ’

‘Now – all’ said Mr Rankstock, jerking his pipe at Miss Bates So all three went through it once more, with degrees of passion Miss Bates, when others desisted, being left singing ‘Heigh-ho! sing heigh-ho! sing – ’ all by herself Next door, the pingpong came to an awe-struck stop ‘At any rate,’ said Mr Rankstock, ‘we all like Shakespeare ’ Miss Bates, whose intelligence, like her singing, tonight seemed some way at the tail of the hunt, looked blank, began to get off the table, and said, ‘But I thought that was a Christmas carol?’

Her companions shrugged and glanced at each other Having taken her magazine away from Mr Winterslow,

G R E E N H O L L Y

she was once more settling down to it when she seemed struck ‘What was that you said, about you had got a ghost?’

Mr Winterslow looked down his nose ‘At this early stage, I don’t like to say very much In fact, on the whole, forget it, if you don’t mind – ’

‘Look,’ Mr Rankstock said, ‘if you’ve started seeing things – ’

‘I am only sorry,’ his colleague said, ‘that I’ve spoke ’

‘Oh no, you’re not,’ said Miss Bates, ‘and we’d better know Just what *is* fishy about this Grange?’

‘There is nothing “fishy”,’ said Mr Winterslow in a fastidious tone It was hard, indeed, to tell from his manner whether he did or did not regret having made a start He had reddened – but not, perhaps, wholly painfully – his eyes, now fixed on the fire, were at once bright and vacant, with unheeding, fumbling movements he got out a cigarette, lit it and dropped the match on the floor, to slowly burn one more hole in the fibre mat Gripping the cigarette between tense lips, he first flung his arms out, as though casting off a cloak, then pressed both hands, clasped firmly, to the nerve-centre in the nape of his neck, as though to contain the sensation there ‘She was marvellous,’ he brought out – ‘what I could see of her ’

‘Don’t talk with your cigarette in your mouth,’ Miss Bates said ‘ – Young?’

‘Adorably, not so very At the same time, quite – oh well, you know what I mean ’

‘Uh-hu,’ said Miss Bates ‘And wearing – ?’

‘I am certain she had a feather boa ’

‘You mean,’ Mr Rankstock said, ‘that this brushed your face?’

THE DEMON LOVER

'And when and where did this happen?' said Miss Bates with legal coldness

Cross-examination, clearly, became more and more repugnant to Mr Winterslow in his present mood. He shut his eyes, sighed bitterly, heaved himself from his chair, said 'Oh, well—' and stood indecisively looking towards the door. 'Don't let us keep you,' said Miss Bates. 'But one thing I don't see is if you're being fed with beautiful thoughts, why you wanted to keep on taking my magazine?'

'I wanted to be distracted'

'?'

'There *are* moments when I don't quite know where I am'

'You surprise me,' said Mr Rankstock — 'Good God man, what is the matter?' For Mr Winterslow, like a man being swooped around by a bat, was revolving, staring from place to place high up round the walls of the gaunt, lit room. Miss Bates observed 'Well, now we *have* started something' Mr Rankstock, considerably kinder, said 'That is only Miss Bates's holly, fluttering in the wind.'

Mr Winterslow gulped. He walked to the inch of mirror propped on the mantelpiece and, as nonchalantly as possible, straightened his tie. Having done thus, he said 'But there isn't a wind tonight'

The ghost hesitated in the familiar corridor. Her visibility, even on Christmas Eve, was not under her own control, and now she had fallen in love again her dependence upon it began to dissolve in patches. This was a concentration of every feeling of the woman prepared to sail downstairs *en grande tenue*. Flamboyance

GREEN HOLLY

and agitation were both present. But between these, because of her years of death, there cut an extreme anxiety it was not merely a matter of, how was she? but of, *was* she - tonight - at all? Death had left her to be her own mirror, for into no other was she able to see.

For tonight, she had discarded the feather boa, it had been dropped into the limbo that was her wardrobe now. Her shoulders, she knew, were bare. Round their bareness shimmered a thousand evenings. Her own person haunted her - above her forehead, the crisped springy weight of her pompadour, round her feet the frou-frou of her skirts on a thick carpet, in her nostrils the scent from her corsage, up and down her forearm the glittery slipping of bracelets warmed by her own blood. It is the haunted who haunt.

There were lights in the house again. She had heard laughter, and there had been singing. From those few dim lights and untrue notes her senses, after their starvation, set going the whole old grand opera. She smiled, and moved down the corridor to the gallery, where she stood looking down into the hall. The tiles of the hall floor were as pretty as ever, as cold as ever, and bore, as always on Christmas Eve, the trickling pattern of dark blood. The figure of the man with the side of his head blown out lay as always, one foot just touching the lowest step of the stairs. It was too bad. She had been silly, but it could not be helped. They should not have shut her up in the country. How could she not make hay while the sun shone? The year round, no man except her husband, his uninteresting jealousy, his dull passion. Then, at Christmas, so many men that one did not know where to turn. The ghost, leaning further over the gallery, pouted down at the suicide.

THE DEMON LOVER

She said 'You should have let me explain' The man made no answer he never had

Behind a door somewhere downstairs, a racket was going on the house sounded funny, there were no carpets The morning-room door was flung open and four flushed people, headed by a young woman, charged out They clattered across the man and the trickling pattern as though there were nothing there but the tiles In the morning-room, she saw one small white ball trembling to stillness upon the floor As the people rushed the stairs and fought for place in the gallery the ghost drew back - a purest act of repugnance, for this was not necessary The young woman, to one of whose temples was strapped a cotton-wool pad, held her place and disappeared round a corner exulting '*My bath, my bath!*' 'Then may you freeze in it, Carla!' returned the scrawniest of the defeated ones The words pierced the ghost, who trembled - they did not know!

Who were they? She did not ask She did not care She never had been inquisitive information had bored her Her schooled lips had framed one set of questions, her eyes a consuming other Now the mills of death with their catching wheels had stripped her of semblance, cast her forth on an everlasting holiday from pretence She was left with - nay, had become - her obsession Thus is it to be a ghost The ghost fixed her eyes on the other, the drawing-room door He had gone in there He would have to come out again

The handle turned, the door opened, Winterslow came out He shut the door behind him, with the sedulous slowness of an uncertain man He had been humming, and now, squaring his shoulders, began to sing, '*Mere folly, mere folly -*' as he crossed the hall

G R E E N H O L L Y

towards the foot of the staircase, obstinately never raising his eyes 'So it is you,' breathed the ghost, with unheard softness She gathered about her, with a gesture not less proud for being tormentedly uncertain, the total of her visibility - was it possible diamonds should not glitter now, on her rising-and-falling breast - and swept from the gallery to the head of the stairs

Winterslow shivered violently, and looked up He licked his lips He said 'This cannot go on'

The ghost's eyes, with tender impartiality and mockery, from above swept Winterslow's face The hair receding, the furrowed forehead, the tired sag of the jowl, the strain-reddened eyelids, the blue-shaved chin - nothing was lost on her, nothing broke the spell With untroubled wonder she saw his handwoven tie, his coat pockets shapeless as saddle-bags, the bulging knees of his flannel trousers Wonder went up in rhapsody so much chaff in the fire She never had had illusions *the illusion was all* Lovers cannot be choosers He'd do He would have to do - 'I know!' she agreed, with rapture, casting her hands together 'We are mad - you and I Oh, what is going to happen? I entreat you to leave this house tonight!'

Winterslow, in a dank, unresounding voice, said 'And anyhow, what made you pick on me?'

'It's Kismet,' wailed the ghost zestfully 'Why did you have to come here? Why you? I had been so peaceful, just like a little girl People spoke of love, but I never knew what they meant Oh, I could wish we had never met, you and I!'

Winterslow said 'I have been here for three months, we have all of us been here, as a matter of fact Why all this all of a sudden?'

THE DEMON LOVER

She said 'There's a Christmas Eve party, isn't there, going on? One Christmas Eve party, there was a terrible accident Oh, comfort me! No one has understood — Don't stand *there*, I can't bear it — not *just there!*'

Winterslow, whether he heard or not, cast a scared glance down at his feet, which were in slippers, then shifted a pace or two to the left 'Let me up,' he said wildly 'I tell you, I want my spectacles! I just want to get my spectacles Let me by!'

'*Let you up!*' the ghost marvelled 'But I am only waiting ,'

She was more than waiting she set up a sort of suction, an icy indrawing draught Nor was this wholly psychic, for an isolated holly leaf of Miss Bates's, dropped at a turn of the staircase, twitched And not, you could think, by chance did the electric light choose this moment for one of its brown fade-outs gradually, the scene — the hall, the stairs and the gallery — faded under this fog-dark but glass-clear veil of hallucination The feet of Winterslow, under remote control, began with knocking unsureness to mount the stairs At their turn he staggered, steadied himself, and then stamped derisively upon the holly leaf 'Bah,' he neighed — '*spectacles!*'

By the ghost now putting out everything, not a word could be dared

'Where are you?"

Weakly, her dress rustled, three steps down the rings on her hand knocked weakly over the panelling 'Here, oh here,' she sobbed 'Where I was before ,'

'Hell,' said Miss Bates, who had opened the drawing-room door and was looking resentfully round the hall 'This electric light '

G R E E N H O L L Y

Mr Rankstock, from inside the drawing-room, said
'Find the man'

'The man has gone to the village' Mr Rankstock, if
you were half a man - Mr Winterslow, what are you
doing, kneeling down on the stairs? Have you come over
funny? Really, this is the end'

At the other side of a baize door, one of the installations began ringing 'Mr Rankstock,' Miss Bates yelled implacably, 'yours, this time' Mr Rankstock, with an expression of hatred, whipped out a pencil and pad and shambled across the hall Under cover of this Mr Winterslow pushed himself upright, brushed his knees and began to descend the stairs, to confront his colleague's narrow but not unkind look Weeks of exile from any hairdresser had driven Miss Bates to the Alice-in-Wonderland style her snood, tied at the top, was now thrust back, adding inches to her pale, polished brow Nicotine stained the fingers she closed upon Mr Winterslow's elbow, propelling him back to the drawing-room 'There is always drink,' she said, 'Come along'

He said hopelessly 'If you mean the bottle between the filing cabinets, I finished that when I had to work last night - Look here, Miss Bates, why should she have picked on me?'

'It has been broken off, then?' said Miss Bates 'I'm sorry for you, but I don't like your tone I resent your attitude to my sex For that matter, why did you pick on her? Romantic, nostalgic, Blue-Danube-fixated - hein? There's Carla, an understanding girl, unselfish, getting over her boils, there are Avice and Lettice, due back on Boxing Day There is me, as you have ceased to observe But oh dear no, we do not trail feather boas - '

' - She only wore that in the afternoon '

THE DEMON LOVER

'Now let me tell you something,' said Miss Bates
'When I opened the door, just now, to have a look at
the lights, what do you think I first saw there in the
hall?'

'Me,' replied Mr Winterslow, with returning assur-
ance

'O-oh no, oh indeed no,' said Miss Bates 'You - why
should I think twice of that, if you *were* striking attitudes
on the stairs? You? - no, I saw your enchanting inverse
Extended, and it is true stone dead, I saw the man of my
dreams From his attitude, it was clear he had died for
love There were three pearl studs in his boiled shirt,
and his white tie must have been tied in heaven And
the hand that had dropped the pistol had dropped a white
rose, it lay beside him brown and crushed from having
been often kissed The ideality of those kisses, for the
last of which I arrived too late - ' here Miss Bates beat
her fist against the bow of her snood - 'will haunt, and
by haunting satisfy me The destruction of his features,
before I saw them, made their former perfection certain,
where I am concerned - And here I am, left, left, left,
to watch dust gather on Mr Rankstock and you, to
watch - yes, I who saw in a flash the ink-black per-
fection of *his* tailoring - mildew form on those clothes
that you never change, to remember how both of you
had in common that way of blowing your noses before
you kissed me He had been deceived - hence the shot,
hence the fall But who was *she*, your feathered friend,
to deceive him? Who could have deceived him more
superbly than I? - *I could be fatal,*' moaned Miss Bates,
pacing the drawing-room, '*I could be fatal - only give*
me a break!'

'Well, I'm sorry,' said Mr Winterslow, 'but really,

GREEN HOLLY

what can I do, or poor Rankstock do? We are just ourselves'

'You put the thing in a nutshell,' said Miss Bates
'Perhaps I could bear it if you just got your hairs cut'

'If it comes to that, Miss Bates, you might get yours set'

Mr Rankstock's re-entry into the drawing-room - this time with brisker step, for a nice little lot of new trouble was brewing up - synchronized with the fall of the piece of holly, again, from the General's frame to the Rankstock chair. This time he saw it in time. 'Your holly, I think, Miss Bates,' he said, holding it out to her.

'We must put it back,' said Miss Bates. 'We haven't got very much.'

'I cannot see,' said Mr Winterslow, 'why we should have any. I don't see the point of holly without berries.'

'The birds have eaten them,' said Miss Bates. 'I cannot control the forces of nature, can I?'

'*Then heigh-ho! sing heigh-ho!*' - Mr Rankstock led off

'Yes,' she said, 'let us have that pretty carol again'

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

FULL moonlight drenched the city and searched it, there was not a niche left to stand in. The effect was remorseless. London looked like the moon's capital - shallow, cratered, extinct. It was late, but not yet midnight, now the buses had stopped the polished roads and streets in this region sent for minutes together a ghostly unbroken reflection up. The soaring new flats and the crouching old shops and houses looked equally brittle under the moon, which blazed in windows that looked its way. The futility of the black-out became laughable from the sky, presumably, you could see every slate in the roofs, every whitened kerb, every contour of the naked winter flowerbeds in the park, and the lake, with its shining twists and tree-darkened islands would be a landmark for miles, yes, miles, overhead.

However, the sky, in whose glassiness floated no clouds but only opaque balloons, remained glassy-silent. The Germans no longer came by the full moon. Something more immaterial seemed to threaten, and to be keeping people at home. This day between days, this extra tax, was perhaps more than senses and nerves could bear. People stayed indoors with a fervour that could be felt the buildings strained with battened-down human life, but not a beam, not a voice, not a note from a radio escaped. Now and then under streets and buildings the

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

earth rumbled the Underground sounded loudest at this time

Outside the new gateless gates of the park, the road coming downhill from the north-west turned south and became a street, down whose perspective the traffic lights went through their unmeaning performance of changing colour. From the promontory of pavement outside the gates you saw at once up the road and down the street from behind where you stood, between the gateposts, appeared the lesser strangeness of grass and water and trees. At this point, at this moment, three French soldiers, directed to a hostel they could not find, stopped singing to listen derisively to the waterbirds wakened up by the moon. Next, two wardens coming off duty emerged from their post and crossed the road diagonally, each with an elbow cupped inside a slung-on tin hat. The wardens turned their faces, mauve in the moonlight, towards the Frenchmen with no expression at all. The two sets of steps died in opposite directions, and, the birds subsiding, nothing was heard or seen until, a little way down the street, a trickle of people came out of the Underground, around the anti-panic brick wall. These all disappeared quickly, in an abashed way, or as though dissolved in the street by some white acid, but for a girl and a soldier who, by their way of walking, seemed to have no destination but each other and to be not quite certain even of that. Blotted into one shadow, he tall, she little, these two proceeded towards the park. They looked in, but did not go in, they stood there debating without speaking. Then, as though a command from the street behind them had been received by their synchronized bodies, they faced round to look back the way they had come.

THE DEMON LOVER

His look up the height of a building made his head drop back, and she saw his eyeballs glitters She slid her hand from his sleeve, stepped to the edge of the pavement and said 'Mysterious Kôr'

'What is?' he said, not quite collecting himself

'This is -

*"Mysterious Kôr thy walls forsaken stand,
Thy lonely towers beneath a lonely moon --"*

- this is Kôr '

'Why,' he said, 'it's years since I've thought of that'
She said 'I think of it all the time -

*"Not in the waste beyond the swamps and sand,
The fever-haunted forest and lagoon,
Mysterious Kôr thy walls——"*

- a completely forsaken city, as high as cliffs and as white as bones, with no history——'

'But something must once have happened why had it been forsaken?'

'How could anyone tell you when there's nobody there?'

'Nobody there since how long?'

'Thousands of years'

'In that case, it would have fallen down'

'No, not Kôr,' she said with immediate authority
'Kôr's altogether different, it's very strong, there is not a crack in it anywhere for a weed to grow in, the corners of stones and the monuments might have been cut yesterday, and the stairs and arches are built to support themselves'

'You know all about it,' he said, looking at her

'I know, I know all about it'

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

'What, since you read that book?'

'Oh, I didn't get much from that, I just got the name I knew that must be the right name, it's like a cry'

'Most like the cry of a crow to me' He reflected, then said 'But the poem begins with "Not" — "*Not in the waste beyond the swamps and sand —*" And it goes on, as I remember, to prove Kôr's not really anywhere When even a poem says there's no such place —'

'What it tries to say doesn't matter I see what it makes me see Anyhow, that was written some time ago, at that time when they thought they had got everything taped, because the whole world had been explored, even the middle of Africa Every thing and place had been found and marked on some map, so what wasn't marked on any map couldn't be there at all So they thought that was why he wrote the poem "*The world is disenchanted,*" it goes on That was what set me off hating civilization'

'Well, cheer up,' he said, 'there isn't much of it left'

'Oh, yes, I cheered up some time ago This war shows we've by no means come to the end If you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it I don't see why not They say we can't say what's come out since the bombing started. By the time we've come to the end, Kôr may be the one city left the abiding city I should laugh'

'No, you wouldn't,' he said sharply '*You* wouldn't — at least, I hope not I hope you don't know what you're saying — does the moon make you funny?"

'Don't be cross about Kôr, please don't, Arthur,' she said

'I thought girls thought about people'

'What, these days?' she said 'Think about people?'

THE DEMON LOVER

How can anyone think about people if they've got any heart? I don't know how other girls manage I always think about Kôr'

'Not about me' he said When she did not at once answer, he turned her hand over, in anguish, inside his grasp 'Because I'm not there when you want me - is that my fault?

'But to think about Kôr *is* to think about you and me '

'In that dead place'

'No, ours - we'd be alone there '

Tightening his thumb on her palm while he thought this over, he looked behind them, around them, above them - even up at the sky He said finally 'But we're alone here '

'That was why I said "Mysterious Kôr"'

'What, you mean we're there now, that here's there, that now's then?' *I don't mind,* he added, letting out as a laugh the sigh he had been holding in for some time 'You ought to know the place, and for all I could tell you we might be anywhere I often do have it, this funny feeling, the first minute or two when I've come up out of the Underground Well, well join the Army and see the world' He nodded towards the perspective of traffic lights and said, a shade craftily 'What are those, then?'

Having caught the quickest possible breath, she replied 'Inexhaustible gases, they bored through to them and lit them as they came up, by changing colour they show the changing of minutes, in Kôr there is no sort of other time'

'You've got the moon, though that can't help making months'

'Oh, and the sun, of course, but those two could do

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

what they liked, we should not have to calculate when they'd come or go'

'We might not have to,' he said, 'but I bet I should'

'I should not mind what you did, so long as you never said, "What next?"'

'I don't know about "next", but I do know what we'd do first'

'What, Arthur?'

'Populate Kôr'

She said 'I suppose it would be all right if our children were to marry each other?'

But her voice faded out, she had been reminded that they were homeless on this his first night of leave. They were, that was to say, in London without any hope of any place of their own. Pepita shared a two-roomed flatlet with a girl friend, in a by-street off the Regent's Park Road, and towards this they must make their half-hearted way. Arthur was to have the sitting-room divan, usually occupied by Pepita, while she herself had half of her girl friend's bed. There was really no room for a third, and least of all for a man, in those small rooms packed with furniture and the two girls' belongings. Pepita tried to be grateful for her friend Callie's forbearance — but how could she be, when it had not occurred to Callie that she would do better to be away tonight? She was more slow-witted than narrow-minded — but Pepita felt she owed a kind of ruin to her Callie, not yet known to be home later than ten, would be now waiting up, in her house-coat, to welcome Arthur. That would mean three-sided chat, drinking cocoa, then turning in — that would be that, and that would be all. That was London, this war — they were lucky to have a roof — London, full enough before the

THE DEMON LOVER

Americans came Not a place they would even grudge you sharing a grave – that was what even married couples complained Whereas in Kôr

In Kôr Like glass, the illusion shattered a car hummed like a hornet towards them, veered, showed its scarlet tail-light, streaked away up the road A woman edged round a front door and along the area railings timidly called her cat, meanwhile a clock near, then another set further back in the dazzling distance, set about striking midnight Pepita, feeling Arthur release her arm with an abruptness that was the inverse of passion, shivered, whereat he asked brusquely ‘Cold? Well, which way? – we’d better be getting on’

Callie was no longer waiting up Hours ago she had set out the three cups and saucers, the tins of cocoa and household milk and, on the gas-ring, brought the kettle to just short of the boil She had turned open Arthur’s bed, the living-room divan, in the neat inviting way she had learnt at home then, with a modest impulse, replaced the cover She had, as Pepita foresaw, been wearing her cretonne housecoat, the nearest thing to a hostess gown that she had, she had already brushed her hair for the night, rebraided it, bound the braids in a coronet round her head Both lights and the wireless had been on, to make the room both look and sound gay all alone, she had come to that peak moment at which company should arrive – but so seldom does From then on she felt welcome beginning to wither in her, a flower of the heart that had bloomed too early There she had sat like an image, facing the three cold cups, on the edge of the bed to be occupied by an unknown man

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

Callie's innocence and her still unsought-out state had brought her to take a proprietary pride in Arthur, this was all the stronger, perhaps, because they had not yet met Sharing the flat with Pepita, this last year, she had been content with reflecting the heat of love It was not, surprisingly, that Pepita seemed very happy — there were times when she was palpably on the rack, and this was not what Callie could understand ‘Surely you owe it to Arthur,’ she would then say, ‘to keep cheerful? So long as you love each other —’ Callie’s calm brow glowed — one might say that it glowed in place of her friend’s, she became the guardian of that ideality which for Pepita was constantly lost to view It was true, with the sudden prospect of Arthur’s leave, things had come nearer to earth he became a proposition, and she would have been as glad if he could have slept somewhere else Physically shy, a brotherless virgin, Callie shrank from sharing this flat with a young man In this flat you could hear everything what was once a three-windowed Victorian drawing-room had been partitioned, by very thin walls, into kitchenette, living-room, Callie’s bedroom The living-room was in the centre, the two others open off it What was once the conservatory, half a flight down, was now converted into a draughty bathroom, shared with somebody else on the girls’ floor The flat, for these days, was cheap — even so, it was Callie, earning more than Pepita, who paid the greater part of the rent it thus became up to her, more or less, to express good will as to Arthur’s making a third ‘Why, it will be lovely to have him here,’ Callie said Pepita accepted the good will without much grace — but then, had she ever much grace to spare? — she was as restlessly secretive, as self-centred, as a little half-

THE DEMON LOVER

grown black cat Next came a puzzling moment Pepita seemed to be hunting that Callie should fix herself up somewhere else ‘But where would I go?’ Callie marvelled when this was at last borne in on her ‘You know what London’s like now And, anyway’ – here she laughed, but hers was a forehead that coloured as easily as it glowed – ‘it wouldn’t be proper, would it, me going off and leaving just you and Arthur, I don’t know what your mother would say to me No, we may be a little squashed, but we’ll make things ever so homey I shall not mind playing gooseberry, really, dear’

But the hominess by now was evaporating, as Pepita and Arthur still and still did not come At half-past ten, in obedience to the rule of the house, Callie was obliged to turn off the wireless, whereupon silence out of the stepless street began seeping into the slighted room Callie recollected the fuel target and turned off her dear little table lamp, gaily painted with spots to make it look like a toadstool, thereby leaving only the hanging light She laid her hand on the kettle, to find it gone cold again and sigh for the wasted gas if not for her wasted thought Where are they? Cold crept up her out of the kettle, she went to bed

Callie’s bed lay along the wall under the window she did not like sleeping so close up under glass, but the clearance that must be left for the opening of door and cupboards made this the only possible place Now she got in and lay rigidly on the bed’s inner side, under the hanging hems of the window curtains, training her limbs not to stray to what would be Pepita’s half This sharing of her bed with another body would not be the least of her sacrifice to the lovers’ love, tonight would be

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

the first night — or at least, since she was an infant — that Callie had slept with anyone Child of a sheltered middle-class household, she had kept physical distances all her life Already repugnance and shyness ran through her limbs, she was preyed upon by some more obscure trouble than the expectation that she might not sleep As to *that*, Pepita was restless, her tossings on the divan, her broken-off exclamations and blurred pleas had been to be heard, most nights, through the dividing wall

Callie knew, as though from a vision, that Arthur would sleep soundly, with assurance and majesty Did they not all say, too, that a soldier sleeps like a log? With awe she pictured, asleep, the face that she had not yet, awake, seen — Arthur's man's eyelids, cheek-bones and set mouth turned up to the darkened ceiling Wanting to savour darkness herself, Callie reached out and put off her bedside lamp

At once she knew that something was happening — outdoors, in the street, the whole of London, the world An advance, an extraordinary movement was silently taking place, blue-white beams overflowed from it, sifting, dropping round the edges of the muffling black-out curtains When, starting up, she knocked a fold of the curtain, a beam like a mouse ran across her bed A searchlight, the most powerful of all time, might have been turned full and steady upon her defended window, finding flaws in the black-out stuff, it made veins and stars Once gained by this idea of pressure she could not lie down again, she sat tautly, drawn-up knees touching her breasts, and asked herself if there were anything she should do She parted the curtains, opened them slowly wider, looked out — and was face to face with the moon*

Below the moon, the houses opposite her window

THE DEMON LOVER

blazed black in transparent shadow, and something — was it a coin or a ring? — glittered half-way across the chalk-white street. Light marched in past her face, and she turned to see where it went out stood the curves and garlands of the great white marble Victorian mantelpiece of that lost drawing-room, out stood, in the photographs turned her way, the thoughts with which her parents had faced the camera, and the humble puzzlement of her two dogs at home. Of silver brocade, just faintly purpled with roses, became her house-coat hanging over the chair. And the moon did more it exonerated and beautified the lateness of the lovers' return. No wonder, she said to herself, no wonder — if this was the world they walked in, if this was whom they were with. Having drunk in the white explanation, Callie lay down again. Her half of the bed was in shadow, but she allowed one hand to lie, blanched, in what would be Pepita's place. She lay and looked at the hand until it was no longer her own.

Callie woke to the sound of Pepita's key in the latch. But no voices? What had happened? Then she heard Arthur's step. She heard his unslung equipment dropped with a weary, dull sound, and the plonk of his tin hat on a wooden chair. 'Sssh-sssh!' Pepita exclaimed, 'she *might* be asleep!'

Then at last Arthur's voice. 'But I thought you said ——'

'I'm not asleep, I'm just coming!' Callie called out with rapture, leaping out from her form in shadow into the moonlight, zipping on her enchanted house-coat over her nightdress, kicking her shoes on, and pinning in place, with a trembling firmness, her plaits in their coronet round her head. Between these movements

M Y S T E R I O U S K ÔR

of hers she heard not another sound Had she only dreamed they were there? Her heart beat she stepped through the living-room, shutting her door behind her

Pepita and Arthur stood the other side of the table, they gave the impression of being lined up Their faces, at different levels – for Pepita's rough, dark head came only an inch above Arthur's khaki shoulder – were alike in abstention from any kind of expression, as though, spiritually, they both still refused to be here Their features looked faint, weathered – was this the work of the moon? Pepita said at once 'I suppose we are very late?'

'I don't wonder,' Callie said, 'on this² lovely night '

Arthur had not raised his eyes, he was looking at the three cups Pepita now suddenly jogged his elbow, saying, 'Arthur, wake up, say something, this is Callie – well, Calhe, this is Arthur, of course '

'Why, yes, of course this is Arthur,' returned Callie, whose candid eyes since she entered had not left Arthur's face Perceiving that Arthur did, not know what to do, she advanced round the table to shake hands with him He looked up, she looked down, for the first time she rather beheld than felt his red-brown grip on what still seemed her glove of moonlight 'Welcome, Arthur,' she said 'I'm so glad to meet you at last I hope you will be comfortable in the flat '

'It's been kind of you,' he said after consideration

'Please do not feel that,' said Callie 'This is Pepita's home, too, and we both hope – don't we, Pepita? – that you'll regard it as yours Please feel free to do just as you like I am sorry it is so small '

'Oh, I don't know,' Arthur said, as though hypnotized, 'it seems a nice little place.'

THE DEMON LOVER

Pepita, meanwhile, glowered and turned away

Arthur continued to wonder, though he had once been told, how these two unlike girls had come to set up together - Pepita so small, except for her too-big head, compact of childish brusqueness and of unchildish passion, and Callie, so sedate, waxy and tall - an unlit candle Yes, she was like one of those candles on sale outside a church, there could be something votive even in her demeanour She was unconscious that her good manners, those of an old fashioned country doctor's daughter, were putting the other two at a disadvantage He found himself touched by the grave good faith with which Callie was wearing that tartish house-coat, above which her face kept the glaze of sleep, and, as she knelt to relight the gas-ring under the kettle, he marked the strong, delicate arch of one bare foot, disappearing into the arty green shoe Pepita was now too near him ever again to be seen as he now saw Callie - in a sense, he never *had* seen Pepita for the first time she had not been, and still sometimes was not, his type No, he had not thought of her twice, he had not remembered her until he began to remember her with passion You might say he had not seen Pepita coming their love had been a collision in the dark

Callie, determined to get this over, knelt back and said 'Would Arthur like to wash his hands?' When they had heard him stumble down the half-flight of stairs, she said to Pepita 'Yes, I was so glad you had the moon'

'Why?' said Pepita She added 'There was too much of it'

'You're tired Arthur looks tired, too'

'How would you know? He's used to marching about But it's all this having no place to go'

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

'But, Pepita, you——'

But at this point Arthur came back from the door he noticed the wireless, and went direct to it 'Nothing much on now, I suppose?' he doubtfully said

'No, you see it's past midnight, we're off the air And, anyway, in this house they don't like the wireless late By the same token,' went on Callie, friendly smiling, 'I'm afraid I must ask you, Arthur, to take your boots off, unless, of course, you mean to stay sitting down The people below us——'

Pepita flung off, saying something under her breath, but Arthur, remarking, 'No, I don't mind,' both sat down and began to take off his boots Pausing, glancing to left and right at the divan's fresh cotton spread, he said 'It's all right is it, for me to sit on this?'

'That's my bed,' said Pepita 'You are to sleep in it'

Callie then made the cocoa, after which they turned in Preliminary trips to the bathroom having been worked out, Callie was first to retire, shutting the door behind her so that Pepita and Arthur might kiss each other good night When Pepita joined her, it was without knocking Pepita stood still in the moon and began to tug off her clothes Glancing with hate at the bed, she asked 'Which side?'

'I expected you'd like the outside'

'What are you standing about for?'

'I don't really know as I'm inside I'd better get in first'

'Then why not get in?'

When they had settled rigidly, side by side, Callie asked 'Do you think Arthur's got all he wants?'

Pepita jerked her head up 'We can't sleep in all this moon'

THE DEMON LOVER

'Why, you don't believe the moon does things, actually?"

'Well, it couldn't hope to make some of us *much* more screwy'

Callie closed the curtains, then said 'What do you mean? And - didn't you hear?' - I asked if Arthur's got all he wants'

'That's what I meant - have you got a screw loose, really?'

'Pepita, I won't stay here if you're going to be like this'

'In that case, you had better go in with Arthur'

'What about me?' Arthur loudly said through the wall 'I can hear practically all you girls are saying'

They were both startled - rather than abashed Arthur, alone in there, had thrown off the ligatures of his social manner his voice held the whole authority of his sex - he was impatient, sleepy, and he belonged to no one

'Sorry,' the girls said in unison Then Pepita laughed soundlessly, making their bed shake, till to stop herself she bit the back of her hand, and this movement made her elbow strike Callie's cheek 'Sorry,' she had to whisper No answer Pepita fingered her elbow and found, yes, it was quite true, it was wet 'Look, shut up crying, Callie what have I done?'

Callie rolled right round, in order to press her forehead closely under the window, into the curtains, against the wall Her weeping continued to be soundless now and then, unable to reach her handkerchief, she staunched her eyes with a curtain, disturbing slivers of moon Pepita gave up marvelling, and soon slept at least there is something in being dog-tired

A clock struck four as Callie woke up again - but

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

something else had made her open her swollen eyelids Arthur, stumbling about on his padded feet, could be heard next door attempting to make no noise Inevitably, he bumped the edge of the table Callie sat up by her side Pepita lay like a mummy rolled half over, in forbidding, tenacious sleep Arthur groaned Callie caught a breath, climbed lightly over Pepita, felt for her torch on the mantelpiece, stopped to listen again Arthur groaned again Callie, with movements soundless as they were certain, opened the door and slipped through to the living-room ‘What’s the matter?’ she whispered. ‘Are you ill?’

‘No, I just got a cigarette Did I wake you up?’

‘But you groaned’

‘I’m sorry, I’d no idea’

‘But do you often?’

‘I’ve no idea, really, I tell you,’ Arthur repeated The air of the room was dense with his presence, overhung by tobacco He must be sitting on the edge of his bed, wrapped up in his overcoat – she could smell the coat, and each time he pulled on the cigarette his features appeared down there, in the fleeting, dull reddish glow ‘Where are you?’ he said ‘Show a light’

Her nervous touch on her torch, like a reflex to what he said, made it flicker up for a second ‘I am just by the door, Pepita’s asleep, I’d better go back to bed’

‘Listen Do you two get on each other’s nerves?’

‘Not till tonight,’ said Callie, watching the uncertain swoops of the cigarette as he reached across to the ash-tray on the edge of the table Shifting her bare feet patiently, she added ‘You don’t see us as we usually are’

‘She’s a girl who shows things in funny ways—I expect

THE DEMON LOVER

she feels bad at our putting you out like this - I know I do But then we'd got no choice, had we?"

'It is really I who am putting you out,' said Callie

'Well, that can't be helped either, can it? You had the right to stay in your own place If there'd been more time, we might have gone to the country, though I still don't see where we'd have gone there It's one harder when you're not married, unless you've got the money Smoke?"

'No, thank you Well, if you're all right, I'll go back to bed'

'I'm glad she's asleep - funny the way she sleeps, isn't it? You can't help wondering where she is You haven't got a boy, have you, just at present?"

'No I've never had one'

'I'm not sure in one way that you're not better off I can see there's not so much in it for a girl these days It makes me feel cruel the way I unsettle her I don't know how much it's me myself or how much it's something the matter that I can't help How are any of us to know how things could have been? They forget war's not just only war, it's years out of people's lives that they've never had before and won't have again Do you think she's fanciful?"

'Who, Pepita?'

'It's enough to make her - tonight was the pay-off We couldn't get near any movie or any place for sitting, you had to fight into the bars, and she hates the staring in bars, and with all that milling about, every street we went, they kept on knocking her even off my arm So then we took the tube to that park down there, but the place was as bad as daylight, let alone it was cold We hadn't the nerve - well, that's nothing to do with you '

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

'I don't mind '

'Or else you don't understand So we began to play -
we were off in Kôr'

'Core of what'

'Mysterious Kôr - ghost city '

'Where?'

'You may ask But I could have sworn she saw it, and
from the way she saw it I saw it, too A game's a game,
but what's a hallucination? You begin by laughing, then
it gets in you and you can't laugh it off I tell you, I
woke up just now not knowing where I'd been, and I
had to get up and feel round this table before I even
knew where I was It wasn't till then that I thought of a
cigarette Now I see why she sleeps like that, if that's
where she goes '

'But she is just as often restless, I often hear her '

'Then she doesn't always make it Perhaps it takes
me, in some way — Well, I can't see any harm when
two people have got no place, why not want Kôr, as a
start? There are no restrictions on wanting, at any rate '

'But, oh, Arthur, can't wanting want what's human?'

He yawned 'To be human's to be at a dead loss '
Stopping yawning, he ground out his cigarette the
-china tray skidded at the edge of the table 'Bring that
light here a moment - that is, will you? I think I've
messed ash all over these sheets of hers '

Callie advanced with the torch alight, but at arm's
length now and then her thumb made the beam wobble
She watched the lit-up inside of Arthur's hand as he
brushed the sheet, and once he looked up to see her
white-nightgowned figure curving above and away
from him, behind the arc of light 'What's "that
swinging?"'

THE DEMON LOVER

'One of my plaits of hair Shall I open the window wider?"

'What, to let the smoke out? Go on! And how's your moon?"

'Mine?' Marvelling over this, as the first sign that Arthur remembered that she was Callie, she uncovered the window, pushed up the sash, then after a minute said 'Not so strong'

Indeed, the moon's power over London and the imagination had now declined. The siege of light had relaxed, the search was over, the street had a look of survival and no more. Whatever had glittered there, coin or ring, was now invisible or had gone. To Callie it seemed likely that there would never be such a moon again, and on the whole she felt this was for the best. Feeling air reach in like a tired arm round her body, she dropped the curtains against it and returned to her own room.

Back by her bed, she listened. Pepita's breathing still had the regular sound of sleep. At the other side of the wall the divan creaked as Arthur stretched himself out again. Having felt ahead of her lightly, to make sure her half was empty, Callie climbed over Pepita and got in. A certain amount of warmth had travelled between the sheets from Pepita's flank, and in this Callie extended her sword-cold body. She tried to compose her limbs, even they quivered after Arthur's words in the dark, words to the dark. The loss of her own mysterious expectation, of her love for love, was a small thing beside the war's total of unlived lives. Suddenly Pepita flung out one hand; its back knocked Callie lightly across the face.

Pepita had now turned over and lay with her face up. The hand that had struck Callie must have lain over the

M Y S T E R I O U S K Ô R

other, which grasped the pyjama collar Her eyes, in the dark, might have been either shut or open, but nothing made her frown more or less steadily it became certain, after another moment, that Pepita's act of justice had been unconscious She still lay, as she had lain, in an avid dream, of which Arthur had been the source, of which Arthur was not the end With him she looked this way, that way, down the wide, void, pure streets, between statues, pillars and shadows, through archways and colonnades With him she went up the stairs down which nothing but moon came, with him trod the ermine dust of the endless halls, stood on terraces, mounted the extreme tower, looked down on the statued squares, the wide, void, pure streets He was the password, but not the answer it was to Kôr's finality that she turned

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

THE stories in the collection entitled *The Demon Lover* were written in war-time London – between the spring of 1941 and the late autumn of 1944. They were written for the magazines or papers in which they originally appeared. During these last years, I did not always write a story when I was asked for one, but I did not write any story that I was not asked for. For at the same time I have been writing a novel, and sometimes I did not want to imperil its continuity. Does this suggest that these *Demon Lover* stories have been in any way forced or unwilling work? If so, that is quite untrue. Actually, the stimulus of being asked for a story, and the compulsion created by having promised to write one were both good – I mean, they acted as releases. Each time I sat down to write a story I opened a door, and the pressure against the other side of that door must have been very great, for things – ideas, images, emotions – came through with force and rapidity, sometimes violence. I do not say that these stories wrote themselves – aesthetically or intellectually speaking, I found the writing of some of them very difficult – but I was never in a moment's doubt as to what I was to write. The stories had their own momentum, which I had to control. The acts in them had an authority which I could not question. Odd enough in their way – and now some seem very odd – they were flying particles.

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

of, something enormous and inchoate that had been going on They were sparks from experience – an experience not necessarily my own

During the war I lived, both as a civilian and as a writer, with every pore open, I lived so many lives, and, still more, lived among the packed repercussions of so many thousands of other lives, all under stress, that I see now it would have been impossible to have been writing only one book I want my novel, which deals with this same time, to be enormously comprehensive But a novel must have form, and, for the form's sake, one is always having to make relentless exclusions Had it not been for my from-time-to-time promises to write stories, much that had been pressing against the door might have remained pressing against it in vain I do not feel I 'invented' anything I wrote It seems to me that during the war the overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody overflowed and merged It is because the general subconsciousness saturates these stories that they have an authority nothing to do with me

These are all war-time, none of them *war*, stories There are no accounts of war action even as I knew it – for instance, air raids Only one character – in 'Mysterious Kôr' – is a soldier, and he only appears as a homeless wanderer round a city These are, more, studies of climate, war-climate, and of the strange growths it raised I see war (or should I say feel war?) more as a territory than as a page of history of its impersonal active historic side I have, I find, not written Arguably, writers are always slightly abnormal people certainly, in so-called 'normal' times my sense of the abnormal has been very acute In war, this feeling of slight differentiation was suspended I felt one with,

and just like, everyone else. Sometimes I hardly knew where I stopped and somebody else began. The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us, equally, heady and disembodied. Walls went down, and we felt, if not knew, each other. We all lived in a state of lucid abnormality.

Till the proofs came, I had not re-read my stories since they were, singly, written. When I read them straight through as a collection, I was most struck by what they have in common. This integrates them and gives them a cumulative and collective meaning that no one, taken singly, has by itself. *The Demon Lover* is an organic whole not merely a collection, but somehow – for better or worse – a book. Also, the order in which the stories stand – an order come at, I may say, casually – seems itself to have a meaning, or to add a meaning, I did not foresee. We begin with a hostess who has not learned how with grace to open her own front door, we end with a pair of lovers with no place in which to sleep in each other's arms. In the first story, a well-to-do house in a polite square gives the impression of having been organically dislocated by shock, in the last, a pure abstract empty timeless city rises out of a little girl's troubled mind. Through the stories – in the order in which they are here placed – I find a rising tide of hallucination. The stories are not placed in the time-order in which they were first written – though, by chance, 'In the Square', placed first here, is the first in the book I wrote, in a hot, raid-less patch of 1941 sunmer, just after Germany had invaded Russia.

The hallucinations in the stories are not a peril, nor are the stories studies of mental peril. The hallucina-

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

tions are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of the characters life, mechanized by the controls of war-time, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in *some* way. It is a fact that in Britain, and especially in London, in war-time many people had strange deep intense dreams 'Whatever else I forget about the war,' a friend said to me, 'I hope I may never forget my own dreams, or some of the other dreams I have been told. We have never dreamed like this before, and I suppose we shall never dream like this again.' Dreams by night, and the fantasies — these often childishly innocent — with which formerly matter-of-fact people consoled themselves by day were compensations. Apart from them, I do not think that the desiccation, by war, of our day-to-day lives can be enough stressed. The outsize World War news was stupefying headlines and broadcasts came down and down on us in hammerlike chops, with great impact but, oddly, little reverberation. The simple way to put it was 'One cannot take things in.' What was happening was out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up. The circumstances under which ordinary British people lived were preposterous — so preposterous that, in a dull way, they simplified themselves. And all the time we knew that compared with those on the Continent we in Britain could not be said to suffer. Foreign faces about the London streets had personal pain and impersonal history sealed up behind the eyes. All this pressure drove egotism underground, or made it whiten like grass under a stone. And self-expression in small ways stopped — the small ways had been so very small that we had not realized how much they amounted to. Planning fun, going places, choosing and buying

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

things, dressing yourself up, and so on All that stopped You used to know what you were like from the things you liked, and chose Now there was not what you liked, and you did not choose Any little remaining choices and pleasures shot into new proportion and new value people paid big money for little bunches of flowers

Literature of the Resistance has been steadily coming in from France I wonder whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing? Personal life here, too, put up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it – war Everyone here, as is known, read more and what was sought in books – old books, new books – was the communicative touch of personal life To survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves – broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room – from the wreckage In the same way, they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another's talk Outwardly, we accepted that at this time individual destiny had to count for nothing inwardly, individual destiny became an obsession in every heart You cannot depersonalize persons Every writer during this time was aware of the personal cry of the individual And he was aware of the passionate attachment of men and women to every object or image or place or love or fragment of memory with which his or her destiny seemed to be identified, and by which the destiny seemed to be assured

The search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world led many down strange paths The attach-

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

ment to these when they had been found produced small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination – in most cases, saving hallucination Writers followed the paths they saw or felt people treading, and depicted those little dear saving illusory worlds I have done both in *The Demon Lover* stories

You may say that these resistance-fantasies are in themselves frightening I can only say that one counteracts fear by fear, stress by stress In 'The Happy Autumn Fields', one finds a woman projected from flying-bombed London, with its day-and-night eeriness, into the key emotional crisis of a Victorian girlhood In 'Ivy Gripped the Steps', a man in the early forties peers through the rusted fortifications and down the dusty empty perspectives of a seaside town at the Edwardian episode that has crippled his faculty for love In 'The Inherited Clock', a girl is led to find the key to her own neurosis inside a timepiece The past, in all these cases, discharges its load of feeling into the anaesthetized and bewildered present It is the 'I' that is sought – and retrieved at the cost of no little pain And the ghosts – definite in 'Green Holly', questionable (for are they subjective purely?) in 'Pink May', 'The Cheery Soul' and 'The Demon Lover' – what part do they play? They are the certainties The bodiless foolish wanton, the puritan other presence, the tipsy cook with her religion of English fare, the ruthless young soldier lover unheard of since 1916 hostile or not, they rally, they fill the vacuum for the uncertain 'I'

I am sorry that my stories do not contain more 'straight' pictures of the war-time scene Such pictures could have been interesting they are interesting in much of the brilliant reportage that exists I know that, in

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

these stories, the backgrounds, and sometimes the circumstances, are only present by inference Allow for the intensely subjective mood into which most of the characters have been cast Remember that these impulsive movements of fantasy are by-products of the non-impulsive major routine of war These are between-time stories – mostly reactions from, or intermissions between, major events They show a levelled-down time, when a bomb on your house was as inexpedient but not more abnormal than a cold in your head There was an element of chanciness and savageness about everything – even, the arrival at a country house for Christmas The claustrophobia of not being able to move about freely and without having to give account of yourself – not, for instance, being able to visit a popular seaside resort, within 70 miles of London, between 1940 and 1944 – appears in many notably, in ‘Ivy Gripped the Steps’ The ghostly social pattern of London life – or, say, the conventional pattern one does not easily break, and is loath to break because it is ‘I’ – saving – appears in the vacant politeness of ‘In the Square’, and in the inebriate night-club conversation, and in ‘Careless Talk’ These are ways in which some of us did go on – after all, we had to go on *some* way And the worthless little speaker in ‘Pink May’ found the war made a moratorium for her married conscience Yes, only a few were heroic purely and see how I have not drawn the heroic ones! But everyone was pathetic – more than they knew Owing, though, to the thunder of those inordinate years, we were shaken out of the grip of our own pathos

In war-time, even in Britain, much has been germinating *What, I do not know – who does, yet, know?* – but I felt the germination, and feel it, here and there,

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

in these stories now that I read them through These are received impressions of happening things, impressions that stored themselves up and acquired force without being analysed or considered These, as war-time stories, are at least contemporary – twenty, forty, sixty years hence they may be found interesting as documents, even if they are found negligible as art This discontinuous writing, nominally ‘inventive’, is the only diary I have kept Transformed into images in the stories, there *may* be important psychological facts if so, I did not realize their importance Walking in the darkness of the nights of six years (darkness which transformed a capital city into a network of inscrutable canyons) one developed new bare alert senses, with their own savage warnings and notations And by day one was always making one’s own new maps of a landscape always convulsed by some new change Through it all, one probably picked up more than can be answered for I cannot answer for much that is in these stories, except to say that I know they are all true – true to the general life that was in me at the time Taken singly, they are disjected snapshots – snapshots taken from close up, too close up, in the middle of the *mélée* of a battle You cannot *render*, you can only embrace – if it means embracing to suffocation-point – something vast that is happening right on top of you Painters have painted, and photographers who were artists have photographed, the tottering lace-like architecture of ruins, dark mass-movements of people, and the untimely brilliance of flaming skies I cannot paint or photograph like this – I have isolated, I have made for the particular, spot-lighting faces or cutting out gestures that are not even the faces or gestures of great sufferers This is how I am, how I feel, whether in war

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

or peace-time, and only as I am and feel can I write. As I said at the start, though I criticize these stories now, afterwards, intellectually, I cannot criticize their content. They are the particular. But through the particular, in war-time, I felt the high-voltage current of the general pass.

October 1944